NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

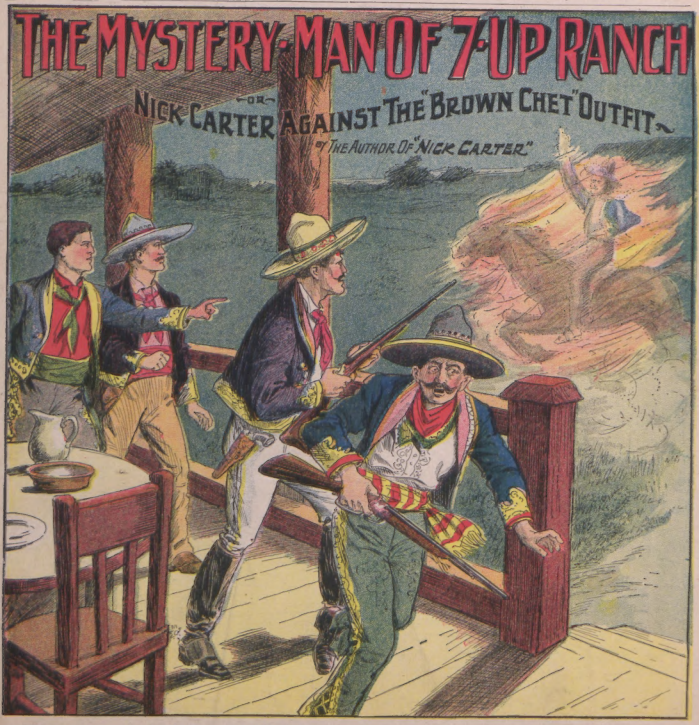
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 555 NEW YORK, AUGUST 17, 1907. Price, Five Cents

THE MYSTERY-MAN OF 7-UP RANCH

—OR— NICK CARTER AGAINST THE "BROWN CHET" OUTFIT

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."



"The mystery man! He is coming!" cried Brown Chet, and in a moment the apparition dashed past the front of the building like a fiery meteor, horse and rider enveloped in flame.

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THE MYSTERY-MAN OF 7-UP RANCH

OR,

Nick Carter Against the "Brown Chet" Outfit.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

BUCK HAWKINS TAKES THE TRAIL.

Nick Carter and his friend Buck Hawkins were stopping at one of the small outlying and little-known hotels at St. John, Arizona; just such a hotel as the Mexican would describe by using the word "fonda."

With them was Godfrey Chester, a man who had had rather a checkered experience for many years, and whose previous history has been more particularly described in the two cases of Nick Carter which preceded this one.*

The latter of these two cases already referred to had just been brought to a conclusion, and the three men had only the preceding day escaped from serious danger by which they were surrounded at the 7-Up Ranch, of which Godfrey Chester's cousin was the proprietor. It will be sufficient to explain here, for the benefit of the reader, that Godfrey Chester and his cousin, who was known locally as "Brown Chet," bore such a striking resemblance to each other that it was with difficulty that their acquaintances could tell them apart; also that Godfrey Chester had succeeded in amassing an enormous fortune in the gold-fields of Alaska, on the Klondike, and that this fortune had so excited the cupidity of his cousin that the latter had sought by every means and device he could conjure up to put Godfrey Chester out of the way for good and all, and then to assume his name and fortune.

Chester had, temporarily, as the result of an accident and exposure following upon it, in the Klondike, lost his memory, and it was the effort to restore this to him that had taken Nick Carter and Buck Hawkins with him to Arizona.

They had gone to the 7-Up Ranch, a day and a half's journey in the saddle, for this purpose, and because the ranch had been formerly owned by Godfrey Chester. It was Nick Carter's belief that proximity to the old scenes would do more to restore his recollection than anything else might.

The detective had not been mistaken in this idea.

But, to the amazement of all three of our friends, they had found, upon their arrival at the ranch, that Brown Chet, who was supposed until then to be dead, was living there, as much in possession of his health and senses as he had ever been.

Brown Chet, aided by his Mexican superintendent, one Diego Morales, had succeeded by strategy in capturing

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY No. 553 and 554.

Chester and Hawkins, binding and gagging them, and confining them in the strong room of the ranch-house; and Nick Carter had found them, and rescued them, the three had secured their horses from the corral, and had escaped to St. John, where we find them now.

But their escape had not been without its consequences, for Brown Chet and his men had pursued them to St. John, and the two parties had met on the street almost in front of the hotel late in the afternoon of this day, and a short and uneventful struggle had been the result of that encounter.

It had closed by Nick Carter lassoing Brown Chet from his horse, and dragging him to the ground, and ultimately dismissing him without injury at the request of Godfrey Chester, but with warnings that he had better mind his own affairs in the future.

It was entirely against Nick Carter's judgment that Brown Chet had been allowed to depart.

He had committed crime after crime with impunity, and had never yet been compelled to face the consequences of any of them.

He had several times sought to murder his cousin, Godfrey Chester, and he had even on one occasion attempted to serve Buck Hawkins in the same way, and had left Buck for dead, shot through the brain, as he supposed.

But Buck had recovered, and it was his pursuit of Brown Chet and his eagerness for revenge which had taken the ex-cowboy and miner to New York in search of Nick Carter, and which had resulted in his presence in St. John with Nick and Godfrey Chester at the time this story opens.

Buck had said very little at the time Brown Chet was permitted to go free, for it was not only against his judgment, but it was also against every precedent of logical retaliation that he had practised all his life long. Buck Hawkins was a thorough believer in the justness of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

Buck had been wantonly, deceitfully, and murderously attacked by Brown Chet when they were both in Alaska, and after two years of weary waiting he had followed the man, as he supposed, to New York, to get square with him, and now that he had found him, he considered it very hard lines indeed that he was compelled, through his friendship for Nick, to let this man whom he hated to go scot-free, and without having given him so much as a tongue-lashing, for Buck was an adept at this gentle art.

During the remainder of the afternoon, after the departure of Brown Chet and his followers for the ranch, Buck was silent and moody, speaking not at all save when spoken to, and then as briefly as possible.

The three had entered the hotel together, after having given directions to the landlord that they were in need of food, and had then made inquiries about the trains that would take them out of St. John, for it was now Godfrey Chester's earnest desire to return to New York as quickly as possible, from whence, having completed certain necessary arrangements, he intended to go at once to Alaska to reestablish himself.

It was discovered, however, that the best train they could get out of St. John would not leave there until about noon of the following day. They might have taken another and slower one that evening, but would not have gained any time by doing so; and hence it was quickly decided that they would wait over in the hotel, inasmuch as they had been made very comfortable there. It was not until late in the evening, when the three were seated together in Nick's room, which happened to be the largest and most comfortable one of the lot, that the subject which was nearest Buck Hawkins' heart was mentioned, and then it was brought about by the detective asking suddenly:

"What's the matter with you, anyhow, Buck? You're as moody as a graven image."

"You'd be moody, too, if you stood in my two shoes," was the quick response.

"Why so, Buck?"

Buck did not answer for several seconds, using the interval to roll and light a cigarette with his usual dexterity. Then he said:

"I suppose, Nick, since I've known you one time and another, I have heard you ask a million questions of me and of others, but this is the only fool question I ever heard you propound."

Nick laughed aloud.

"I suppose you think I ought to know the answer to it, eh?" he said.

"I think you do know the answer to it," replied Buck. "Possibly I do, but all the same it does not strike me as being an excuse for your being so grouchy."

Buck threw away the cigarette that he had just lighted, and got upon his feet; then he drew his tall form to its height directly in front of the detective, and said:

"Look here, Nick, didn't I go to the Klondike between four and five years ago in search of a fortune? Didn't I, while I was on the way there, meet up with that infernal scoundrel Brown Chet, on the steamer? Didn't he make up to me, with his handsome face and oily tongue and smooth manner, until he induced me to whack up with him on the venture, and go pards with him in our prospectin' in the North? Didn't I do that thing, and didn't we light out to the colder country, he makin' me believe all the time that he was Godfrey Chester? Didn't he, although he had never been in that country, go almost as straight as a rocket to some of the richest placer mines to be found in that country? Didn't he act the scoundrel even then, and leave me to work the claim day after day, all alone, while he went mooning off around the country,

searching for what I didn't know at the time, but for what I know now to have been his cousin's mine?"

He paused for a moment to light another cigarette, and then continued:

"And didn't the scoundrel find it without ever letting me know a word about it? Didn't he then make up his mind to lay me out and to bury me under the rocks somewhere, so that I would not know his secret, and I never could betray it?

"Didn't he shoot me, Nick Carter, and didn't his bullet plow a furrow along the top of my head that looked me for more than two years? Didn't I find out later, more by luck than chance, and because a roving surgeon had gone up to that country from San Francisco for his health—didn't I find out after the operation that surgeon had performed upon me, how I had been tricked, played upon, and made a fool of from first to last by that infernal coyote in human shape? Isn't all that true that I have said, Nick Carter?"

"Sure it's true," replied the detective.

"And do you mean to say you've got the face to sit there, knowing me as well as you do, and ask me what in thunder makes me grouchy and moody? Don't you suppose I've got any feelin's left?"

The detective did not answer immediately, and although he had been smiling while Buck indulged in this tirade of questions, his face became solemn now.

He did know Buck Hawkins thoroughly well.

He knew that Buck had all his life lived the half-wild career of the frontier, beginning as a cowboy when he had been barely old enough to sit in the saddle and throw a rope, and that he had done everything in the Northwest that a man can do, from herding sheep, whacking bulls, and punching cows, to prospecting for mines, and, finally, to tearing them open with powder and fuse.

And Buck's Western career had begun at a time when a man depended wholly upon his own resources, and often continued to live because he could shoot quicker than the other fellow.

Buck would not have given the name of "revenge" to what he called "getting square" or "even" with an adversary of the past, but he believed in the doctrine of hitting back as thoroughly as he believed in his own existence.

Nick realized that it had indeed been a severe test of Buck Hawkins' good nature and of his love for him, that the miner had permitted Brown Chet to depart in peace without uttering a word of protest.

"I am sorry, Buck," was all he said, "but you must remember that Mr. Chester here is my client; it was his wish that his cousin be set free."

"Well, don't I know that?" asked Buck. "Did I offer any objection? Did I say a word to find any fault?"

"Not one, Buck."

"Well, then, I don't think you've got any kick comin' because I'm a little bit grouchy about the whole thing. Mebbe I'll be better-natured by morning. Good night." He turned on his heel and with a curt nod at Godfrey Chester left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

A few moments later Chester departed to his own room, and then the detective retired.

But when he awoke in the morning, dressed, and went down-stairs, he was met at the front door by the proprietor of the hotel, who handed him a sealed envelope, containing a letter, addressed in Buck Hawkins' writing:

"Dear Nick," the detective read when he had opened the letter. "By the time you read this I shall be well on my way back toward the 7-Up Ranch, and the scoundrel who owns it. If you'd got it into your nut that I had given up all thoughts of squaring accounts between him and me you were very much off your base. There is a whole lot coming to Mr. Brown Chet, and I intend to give it to him good and plenty. When things are finished, and the balance-sheet is drawn up, and ruled with red ink, you may expect to see and hear from me again, unless I have turned my toes up toward the skies, and passed in my checks. BUCK HAWKINS."

The detective folded the letter, and returned it to the envelope; then he said to the proprietor:

"When was this letter given to you to hand to me?"

"Somewhere about eleven o'clock last night, Mr. Carter."

"What!" said Nick. "At eleven o'clock last night? That was less than half an hour after he left my room."

"I suppose it was," remarked the hotel-man.

"Did he start away at once?" asked Nick.

"Yes, sir, right away."

"What did he take with him?"

"Nothing but a led horse, sir. Just the one he rode and the one he pulled along behind him."

"Did he make any remark to you about where he was going, or about what he intended to do?"

"Nary a word, Mr. Carter, except that he asked me to say nothing to you or your friends until this morning, when I was to give you this letter as soon as I saw you."

"All right," said the detective. "Thank you."

Nick turned about then, and went back up the stairs, where he rapped at the door of Godfrey Chester's room.

"Mr. Chester," he said, when that gentleman had opened to him, "read this letter, if you please, and then tell me if you are willing to return to New York without me. I feel that it is quite necessary that I should follow Buck Hawkins back again to the ranch."

Godfrey Chester read the letter through to the end, and then, returning it to the detective, he said calmly:

"I think it is your duty to do that, Carter. And I think, also, it is my duty to go with you. You came out here

with me on a sort of wild-goose chase, and I would be less than grateful if I should abandon you now."

The two men shook hands cordially and silently upon this compact, but after a moment the detective said:

"There may be, and there probably will be, pretty tough work ahead of us, Mr. Chester, but all the same I'm not going to desert Buck Hawkins now."

CHAPTER II.

NICK CARTER'S COWBOY TRICK.

The detective knew, because of the fact that Buck Hawkins had taken a led horse with him, that it was his intention to cover the ground as swiftly as possible, and to lose no time in getting to the 7-Up Ranch.

He figured it out, also, that Buck had calculated upon reaching his destination some time during the following night. The fact that he had departed on his journey before midnight, and intended to push forward with all possible speed, as evidenced by the presence of the led horse, assured Nick that the miner hoped to make the distance in about twenty-four hours, or in very little more than that.

But the time was now approaching seven o'clock in the morning, and accordingly Buck had approximately eight hours start of any pursuit that might be undertaken.

On the face of it, therefore, it was folly for the detective to hope that he and Godfrey Chester could by any possibility overtake Hawkins on the trail.

Nick decided, therefore, that if he hoped to be of any assistance to Buck, who he felt sure would very quickly get in some sort of trouble, he and Chester must try and approach the ranch as secretly as possible.

The few short talks that the detective had enjoyed with the proprietor of the hotel had led Nick to believe that he was a man who could be trusted, so, after they had eaten their breakfast, he called him aside, and said to him:

"I wonder how much you know, Chapman, about the events which led up to the scene that took place yesterday afternoon in front of your hotel."

"I only know a very little, Mr. Carter, but I guess a good deal," the man drawled in reply. "You see, Mr. Carter, I've been around this part of the country a good many years, and I used to know considerable about those two cousins. I remember when they came here. I've run most everything in St. John, from a gambling-house, with an undertaker's annex, to this hotel, and there's mighty few people that have ever come around here that I haven't run up against."

"Go on," said Nick. "Say a little more on that subject; you interest me."

"When you came here the other day and I saw who it was you had with you, I was not a bit fooled because he registered on our books as 'Alexander Black.' I knew him for Godfrey Chester, but there wasn't any call for me to say anything, so I didn't."

"Had you seen the other cousin around here lately?" asked Nick.

"Nary a bit, Mr. Carter. I had no idea he was around here at all until he showed up in front of this house yesterday. To tell you the truth, I'd got it into my noddle somehow that they were both dead. But there is another thing, Mr. Carter; when that gazabo did show up here yesterday, with his hair as black as Mr. Chester's, I was fairly puzzled for a few moments, because I knew that his hair ought to be brown."

"Do you mean to say," asked Nick, "that you knew the difference between them—that you knew him to be Brown Chet, notwithstanding his disguise?"

"Surest thing you know," said the landlord.

"Well," remarked the detective, after a short pause, during which he thought deeply, "it isn't necessary that we should enter into the details of this case. It is only important that I should explain to you exactly what we are up against now."

"Mebbe I know already, Mr. Carter."

"Possibly you do. But all the same I'll tell it in my own way."

"Let 'er go."

"Godfrey Chester made a fortune in the Klondike after he left here. Brown Chet tried to steal that fortune and murder his cousin also after he left here. Brown Chet hasn't yet given up that idea, and he was endeavoring to carry it out when he got into that trouble with us yesterday."

The landlord nodded.

"Brown Chet also treated Buck Hawkins pretty badly in Alaska, and among other things tried to kill him, with the result that Buck was hot on his trail up to the time he was made to believe that Brown Chet was dead."

"I see," nodded the landlord.

"When Buck and I came out here, together with Godfrey Chester, Buck of course found out that Brown Chet was alive, and we had a pretty good scrimmage out there at the ranch during which a few people were hurt, and Buck himself had a slight wound."

"I understand," said the landlord.

"Well, Chapman, the point is this: now that Buck has discovered that Brown Chet is alive he has made up his mind not to forget that little grudge he has got against him, and rather than try to persuade me to go back to the ranch with him, he slipped away from us last night, as you know."

"Yes, I suspected something of the kind from the look on Buck Hawkins' face."

"There are twenty men or more in that outfit on the 7-Up," continued the detective, "and Buck is very foolish

to run himself up against all of them in a search for that one man. He has gone back there all alone to tackle, single-handed, that entire outfit, so it is my duty to go after him, and help him, and that is precisely what I'm going to do."

"Exactly, sir."

"Now, I've been thinking, Chapman, that it's more than likely that Brown Chet, or at least his superintendent, Morales, has got friends here, who would report to them whether Chester and I take the train out of town to-day or not."

"I reckon ye ain't far wrong about that."

"So I'll tell you what I've decided to do, Chapman, and I want your help."

"You can bank on that, Mr. Carter, to the limit."

"I want to make a bluff at taking that train. I want to go aboard of the train with Chester, and leave town, and in order to carry out a little plan I have formed in my mind, I want to ask you first if by any chance you happen to know the conductor who runs that train?"

"Sure, I know him; like a book."

"In that case, if you will go to the train with us and put us aboard of it, I think you can do exactly what I wish done."

"Tell me what it is."

"I want you to induce that conductor, and to pay him for it, if he will accept money, to slow up his train eight or ten miles out of town, at some point that you will suggest to him, where we can remain in hiding until dark to-night."

The landlord's eyes twinkled merrily, and he grinned broadly.

"I think I know just the spot for that little act," he said quickly. "Go on with your plan."

"I don't know that I have formed it very definitely, as yet, but in the main this is the idea: I want to get off of the train with Chester and remain in hiding somewhere till dark, after which I want to disguise Chester and myself as a couple of Mexican vaqueros, who are rustling for a job. When that is done, and the disguise is completed, which it should be before another morning, we will light out together for 7-Up."

The landlord nodded his head vigorously.

"That's all right," he said, "if you can do it."

"Do what?" asked Nick.

"Fix up the two disguises so that nobody will see through them, and carry out the two characters so that nobody will suspect the deception."

"It's dead easy, Chapman."

"Not so easy as you think, sir. I don't believe there's a cowboy on the 7-Up Ranch who is a white man; they are all Mexicans and half-breeds."

"All the better," replied the detective. "You will know, of course, Chapman, that Mr. Chester has passed the greater part of his life on a ranch, and it was not so many years ago that he was employing that same kind of men, so that he not only speaks their language perfectly, but he knows every trait and characteristic and peculiarity of that kind of a man."

"I wasn't thinking about him," said the landlord, with a smile, "but about you."

Nick laughed and shrugged his shoulders, and replied: "Oh, as far as I'm concerned, I'll take the chances, but the point is, Chapman, do you think you can fix that business up for us with the conductor?"

"Surest thing you know."

"And do you know of a good place for him to let us leave the train?"

"Best in the world."

"Where is it?"

"Just eleven miles from here, Mr. Carter, as the crow flies, and the railroad-track runs. I'll go with you to the train just as you outlined it; I'll fix it up with the conductor, and it won't cost you a cent, either, and I'll give you a letter to my man out there at the ranch, so that he will look out for you when you arrive."

"That'll be very kind of you, Chapman."

"And that ain't all, either. 'Twon't be very long after dark before you'll see me moseying along after you, and I'll bring along with me a couple of charra costumes, sombreros, and the whole rig, together with a certain kind of stain that I happen to have on hand here, which will do the trick, so far as your complexions are concerned."

"And what about horses, Mr. Chapman?" asked Nick.

"Horses? huh! you just leave that to me. In fact, Mr. Carter, you just leave all the details of this business to me, and I'll see you started for 7-Up before midnight."

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY MAN.

Everything worked smoothly from that time on, or, as Landlord Chapman expressed it, "as if they were on wheels, and the wheels were well greased."

The conductor proved perfectly willing to slow up the train sufficiently for Nick and Chester to drop off from it at the desired place, and they did so from the rear platform, quickly getting behind the car itself, so it is doubtful if there was a passenger on the train who realized that fellow travelers had left it thus unceremoniously.

A mile away to the northward the detective could see the group of buildings which belonged to Landlord Chapman, and which were the headquarters of his small, but thoroughly stocked, ranch.

Our friends were only a short time covering the distance to the ranch, where the letter secured them a cordial reception, and they were made thoroughly comfortable to await the arrival of Chapman.

He got there shortly after dark, leading a packhorse, and soon thereafter Nick and Chester were busily engaged in staining their faces, and necks, and arms, and hands, and donning the vaquero costumes, in preparation for what they had to do.

By midnight, as Chapman had prophesied, they were ready to depart on their journey to 7-Up, and nobody could have told, to look at them or to talk with them, that they were not exactly what they pretended to be, half-breed Mexicans, save only perhaps that Godfrey Chester was rather tall for the character he had assumed.

But this was something that could not be helped, so, with a pair of splendid horses, each of which was provided with a Mexican saddle and bridle, they started away from Chapman's ranch at one o'clock that morning to follow the trail of Buck Hawkins to 7-Up.

It is not necessary that we should go at all into the details of their ride across the plains. They halted shortly after daylight for a rest, and to bait their horses and themselves, as well, and from that time forth went on by easy stages, for it was no part of Nick Carter's plan that they should have the appearance of hard riding when they should arrive at their destination.

Besides, the detective argued to himself, that now there was no special occasion for haste, because, if Buck Hawkins had been in any special danger when he arrived at 7-Up, he would have met it, and have escaped, or succumbed to it, before now.

Nick timed himself as well as he could to arrive at the ranch before dusk in the evening, and so well did he plan that when at last they did draw up in front of the ranch-house of 7-Up, the sun had only just dropped out of sight.

As had happened once before in Nick Carter's experience at this ranch, Diego Morales came through the front door to greet the arrival of these two strangers, and he approached Nick and Chester with a serene smile upon his handsome, but sinister, face, and addressed them in Spanish:

"Welcome, señors, to our poor little house," he said. "It is at your disposal so long as you care to make use of it." It was plain that in the gloaming Morales had not recognized that here were two vaqueros looking for a job, but had supposed from the gaudiness of their attire that they were travelers.

But it was part of Nick's plan to quickly undeceive him, and, although he leaped from the saddle to the ground, he slipped his arm through the bridle, and leaned against his horse, while he said, also in Spanish:

"A thousand thanks, señor, but we are only men who are looking for work. We have lately come across the border from Mexico, where the climate has become too warm for us, and the politics don't agree with our digestion."

Morales shrugged his shoulders, and smiled. He, too, had left Mexico, originally, because of the same conditions.

"My outfit is full up," he said. "It is, however, possible that I may find places for you."

"Do, señor, if you can," urged Nick, "and we beg that you will arrange the pay to suit yourself."

Morales put his fingers to his lips, and whistled shrilly, and presently, when one of his men appeared, he said to our two friends:

"Manuel will show you to the corral, and where you are to eat and sleep. After he has shown you around, come here to me; I would talk with you further."

Nick and Chester bowed without replying, and followed Manuel as they had been directed to do.

It was a half-hour later when they returned to the big ranch-house where Diego Morales was keeping solemn vigil on the veranda, awaiting them.

"I will ask you to dine with me to-night, men," he said to them, while he motioned toward a couple of chairs. "After that, you will, of course, take up your quarters with the other vaqueros.

"You may give me your names now and the names of the places you came from, and such other particulars about yourselves as I desire to know."

Nick, who was about to seat himself in the chair that had been indicated for him, and who was perfectly familiar with the haughty reserve which all Mexicans feel and practise, drew himself up in an attitude of pride, and replied coldly:

"Señor, with your permission, I am for the present Primotivo; my friend here is for the present Secundino; more than that about ourselves we have temporarily forgotten. Where we came from, and whither we may go, does not for the present interest us at all, and, therefore, would be of still less interest to you, señor."

Morales waved his hand, and smiled broadly.

"*Bueno*," he said, "it is well, hombres. I don't wish to appear overcurious. Be seated."

Nick and Chester murmured their thanks, and Morales continued:

"I suppose I may venture to inquire if you are familiar with the class of work you have asked to do?"

"We are entirely familiar with it," returned Nick, replying for both.

"And," continued Morales, "if I keep you here, will you promise that you will not leave me without warning? In other words, may I rely upon you to be faithful to my interests?"

"Most certainly, señor."

"No matter to what extremes that interest may take you?"

"We will not question that," said Nick, with a slight shrug.

"My men," continued Morales, "must be faithful, or

they cannot remain, and those who prove unfaithful rarely leave me, ever."

"You mean——" asked Nick interrogatively.

"I mean," said Morales, with his icy smile, "that we find a convenient place for a shallow grave, and bury them here."

"*Esta bien,*" said Nick. "It is very well; we are satisfied."

Morales left his chair, and solemnly shook hands with each of them to bind the compact, and when he returned to his seat all three were rolling their inevitable cigarettes, preparatory to smoking on the agreement, for, after all, a Mexican is not far removed from an Indian.

Nick was wondering in the meantime if Buck Hawkins were somewhere inside that ranch-house, a prisoner, or if he had been already killed and buried in one of those shallow graves that Morales had referred to.

He wondered, also, that the proprietor of the ranch, Brown Chet, did not put in an appearance.

But even as he asked himself that question the sharp strokes of horse's hoofs rang out upon the air, and Brown Chet dashed around the corner of the house, and leaped from the saddle to the ground directly in front of them.

His sudden appearance was evidently as unexpected to Morales as it had been to the others, but added to this his horse's breast and withers were covered with flecks of foam, the animal was breathing hard, and Brown Chet himself looked as though he had been through some sort of an adventure.

His sombrero was missing, he carried no arms whatever, and even the lariat was missing from the pommel of his saddle, a circumstance which was enough in itself to have caused Morales alarm.

Morales started forward, as if he would offer some assistance to his master, but before he could reach him Brown Chet had motioned him back, while he stood staring steadily into the faces of the two strangers.

One look was evidently enough to reassure him, however, for his face cleared itself of the angry frown, and only assumed again the aspect of fatigue, mingled with a suggestion of fear, that it had worn upon his arrival there.

"What has happened, señor?" exclaimed Morales, who had now rushed forward until he was almost in touch with his master. "You went away early this morning; all the afternoon we have watched out for you, and it was but an hour ago when I sent out parties in three different directions in search of you. What has happened?"

A wolfish smile flitted across the face of Brown Chet for an instant, and then he replied, with three quickly spoken words, uttered almost in a whisper, which trembled as if with fear:

"The Mystery Man!" he said, and without another word he passed them, and entered the house.

CHAPTER IV.

A FLAMING APPARITION.

The reply that Brown Chet had made before he entered the house, to the question asked him by Diego Morales, was a strange one—stranger even than the conduct and appearance of the man who made it; but the effect that it produced upon Morales, was even more remarkable.

The mere utterance of the expression seemed to affect him almost like a blow; at all events he started backward so precipitately that he staggered into his chair, and dropped his cigarette to the floor of the veranda.

Nick Carter cast a furtive glance toward Chester, and then he stepped quickly across the intervening space toward Morales, and asked in Spanish:

"What is it, señor? What has happened? What did the caballero say?" It was as if he did not understand English himself, although he did not say so.

For a moment Morales stared at him without replying, and then, rather irrelevantly, he demanded:

"Are you afraid of ghosts, Primotivo?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you believe in them?" insisted the superintendent.

Again Nick shrugged his shoulders, but this time he replied:

"I have never seen or heard of a ghost, señor, that could not stop a bullet."

"Caramba!" ejaculated Morales. "Then you have never seen or heard of this one that we call the 'Mystery Man'!"

He pronounced the words "Mystery Man" in Spanish, so they did not sound at all like the expression that had been used by Brown Chet, but he hastened to add an explanation of their meaning, for already he was imbued with the idea that neither of these two men before him comprehended English.

"So?" said Nick. "The Mystery Man? Who and what is he, Señor Morales?"

"Heaven only knows!" was the faint and shuddering reply.

"A ghost, perhaps?" insisted Nick.

"A ghost, or the devil!" asserted Morales.

Nick laughed aloud, and with such a significant look toward Chester that the latter joined in with him; then he said:

"Secundino and I are not afraid of ghosts, or of the devil himself, señor; we have met worse, and it is the truth when I tell you we have encountered worse within forty-eight hours, and not so very far from where we are standing now, either."

"What do you mean?" asked Morales. "Have you two seen the Mystery Man?"

Nick laughed again.

"No, not the Mystery Man, perhaps," he said, "nor even a man of mystery, but a man and many men who strove to take our lives—and failed; who kept us on the

run, and made us fight; but we are here, thank Heaven, safe at last, and now that you have seen fit to employ us if you will tell us about this Mystery Man we will hunt him for you; eh, Secundino? We will hunt him, will we not?"

"Yes, we will hunt him," said Chester.

"Look you," said Nick, again addressing Morales. "I do not say we have lived in the states of Guerrera and Oaxaca, but you may draw your own conclusions, señor. In those two states are many mystery men; men who confine you in the mountains and cut off your thumbs, and cut off your nose, and send them to your friends, that they may send money and other inducements in exchange for your body."

"Guerrerans, señor, are not afraid of ghosts, or the devil, either. The law and General Porferio Diaz are the only two things they fear."

Morales smiled grimly.

"It is well," he said. "I am glad you came here."

"We will make you twice glad before we depart," returned Nick, with a double meaning which Morales did not understand; "and now, señor, will you tell us about this Mystery Man?"

"Not now. Another time."

"But why?"

"Not to-night. In the daylight. To-morrow, when the sun is shining."

"You act, señor, as if you feared him."

"I do, and you would fear him, too, if you were to see him."

"Not I!" said Nick. "I fear no man that lives, and certainly not a dead man."

"Hark!" exclaimed Morales, leaning suddenly forward in his chair, in an attitude of listening. "Do you hear anything?"

"Yes," said Nick, "another horse is approaching. Perhaps it is another who has seen the Mystery Man."

"No!" exclaimed Morales, leaping to his feet in sudden excitement. "It is the Mystery Man himself! Let me pass!"

With a bound he leaped over the threshold through the doorway into the house; he was gone but a moment when he returned with a Winchester in his hand, and stood leaning against one of the posts of the veranda, with the Winchester half-raised, in readiness to fire, and with his head bent forward eagerly, while he listened to the sound of the hoofbeats, that became louder and more distinct every instant.

Nick, who was watching him narrowly, saw that the Mexican was trembling violently, and he thought then that it was no wonder that the Mystery Man had escaped unscathed from the bullets that had been fired after him, if his mere proximity invoked such unstinted fear as was now manifested by the administradore of the rancho.

With the nearer approach of the hoofbeats, Morales' trembling became more violent, and then, when it came to a point when it seemed that the mysterious horseman must leap into view at any instant, Brown Chet suddenly returned to them, dashing out through the door, also with a Winchester in his grasp.

"The Mystery Man!" he exclaimed. "The Mystery Man! He is coming!" and he took his station also near the front of the veranda, and waited.

It was only a moment after that, when, with a rushing sound, such as only a horse can make when it is on a dead run, the apparition—for it seemed nothing more nor less than that—rushed into view around the corner of the house, where Brown Chet had appeared so short a time before, and dashed past the front of the building like a fiery meteor, for horse and rider seemed literally enveloped in flame.

They came and they were gone in an instant, for instead of pursuing the trail starting from the house, the horse was wheeled around the next corner of it, and disappeared almost as suddenly as it had leaped into view.

During that brief moment when it was in sight, Brown Chet and his man Morales both fired spasmodically with their Winchesters. The former succeeded in discharging two shots, but Nick Carter noticed, with a quiet smile of derision, that both had been too excited to take any aim at all, and that all three bullets had been sent harmlessly into the air far over the head of the desired target.

And then, when the shots were fired, and the flaming horse and rider were gone as suddenly as they had appeared in view, Brown Chet and Morales dropped their guns clattering upon the veranda, and turned, as with one impulse, and disappeared into the house.

The detective did not wonder that any person who was given to superstition should have been frightened almost beyond reason by an apparition such as that which had just passed them in the dark.

But Nick and Chester, both undismayed by fear, and free from superstitious terrors of any sort, had not been so blinded by these extraordinary circumstances that they could not see what was passing, and conjecture fairly well upon the cause of it.

That the smell of sulfur was in the air as soon as the apparition had passed, and that the apparition itself had been enveloped in flame, could not be denied, but Nick had seen and understood perfectly well that the flames were caused by no more important a thing than prairie-grass, which had been packed into some sort of a wire rack, fastened to the horse, and its rider, in order to create the effect that has been described; and after that it only became necessary that the horse should be kept at a furious gallop so long as the grass was burning, in order that the heat of the flames should travel harmlessly to the rear.

If one adds, to this a copious sprinkling of sulfur

through the dry prairie-grass, the odor, as well as the other effects, may be easily understood.

The detective had just turned to say a word about the Mystery Man to Chester, when Morales dashed out of the house again, and, with a sneering laugh, called out:

"Now is the chance for you two men who are afraid of nothing, living or dead, to prove it. The Mystery Man has gone toward the south from here; get horses from the corral, and go after him. If you are alive an hour hence, return for your evening meal!"

"Good!" exclaimed Nick, in Spanish. "We will go!" and, followed by Chester, he started on a run for the corral.

CHAPTER V.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE MYSTERY MAN.

Night was already advanced about an hour when Nick Carter, accompanied by Godfrey Chester, in their characters of Primotivo and Secundino, galloped away from the ranch-house at 7-Up in pursuit of the Mystery Man.

The young moon, not yet very large, but in that dry climate unusually brilliant, floated before them in a cloudless field, so they were enabled to see long distances, or every side of them; and they had not gone more than a mile from the ranch before Nick pulled up his horse, and signaled Chester to do the same.

"It looks very much to me as if we were chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, Chester," he said to his companion, throwing his right leg over the pommel of the saddle, and sitting sideways on the horse. "I haven't a cigar with me, old man, but if you'll roll me one of those cigarettes of yours, I'll try it."

"Aren't you going to keep up the chase?" asked Chester.

"There doesn't seem to be anything to chase," he responded. "The Mystery Man has managed to disappear very completely, and might almost literally be said to have gone up in smoke."

"And flame," laughed Chester. "Don't forget that."

"Oh, I'm not forgetting it. But, Chester, it struck me when that Mystery Man was approaching, and as he passed the house, that you didn't seem to be as astonished as, under the circumstances, you should have been."

"Eh?" asked Chester, smiling across at Nick.

"Just," said Nick. "I tried at the moment to keep one eye on all three of you, whereas, like other men, I am possessed of only two eyes, it was somewhat difficult; also, as I was more interested in the conduct of the other two than of yourself, I regarded you less closely than I did them."

Chester smiled more heavily than before, and, after lighting his cigarette, he said:

"That was quite natural, I think."

"The Mystery Man was not entirely a surprise to you, Chester," remarked Nick quickly.

"No, he was not."

"And that was one reason why I was glad of the opportunity to pursue him so I could get you off here by ourselves so I could question you about it. I fancy from your manner that as long ago as when you lived here there was a Mystery Man, not unlike this fellow, with whose appearance you were familiar."

"You are quite right, Carter."

"Then, in order to save time, I think it would be well if you will tell me about it."

"There is very little to tell you about the Mystery Man, save that I can inform you exactly what he was at that time. What he may be now, or who he may be now, I have no idea."

"Who was he, then, as long ago as when you lived here, Chester?"

"Myself!"

"What!"

"I was the Mystery Man myself," said Chester quietly.

The detective took time to put a light to the freshly rolled cigarette that Chester had given to him, and then he asked:

"Will you tell me about it, please?"

"There isn't a great deal to tell, Carter. You know I don't care to go very deeply into my history at that time or before that time. My reluctance to do so is not because of any shame connected with it, for I assure you there was none, but it's because of the sadness and sorrow that I had to endure for years, which I dislike exceedingly to recall."

"I understand," said Nick. "Tell me about the Mystery Man; that is all I care to know."

"My cousin and I lived here at this ranch together for years. He hated me; I despised him. I knew all the time he was plotting and planning against me and there was never a moment night or day during those years, when I was not thoroughly on my guard, or had a trusted man who lived with me then, on guard for me."

"I understand," repeated Nick.

"The first suggestion of the Mystery Man," came to me from the cowboy I have just referred to, whose name was Hawks, and who looked in person just as much like our friend Hawkins as the name was like his."

"Go on," said Nick, with more interest than he had expressed before.

"It was Bill Hawks who suggested the Mystery Man to me, and he got the idea, at least so he informed me, from having traveled at one time with a circus troupe whose something very much of the same sort had been included."

"Why did he suggest it at all?" asked the detective.

"Because he thought it would be well if we could do something to frighten my cousin, Ramon Cruz."

The detective nodded.

"He explained to me the method of arranging the paraphernalia of the Mystery Man, which, as you guessed, is accomplished by means of a network of coarse wire which is attached by means of supports to the shoulders of the rider and also the horse, behind the saddle. When the Mystery Man intends to go forth on one of his rides, he stuffs the wire network with prairie-grass, which in spots has been dampened so it will catch and hold powdered sulphur sprinkled upon it, and then with the frame attached to his shoulders and the horse, as I have described, he rides forth to the point where he intends to begin his short career, and when everything is in readiness, he has only to touch a match to the dried grass and then spur forward into a furious gallop."

"A very simple plan," said Nick, nodding.

"The arrangement, as I have described it," continued Chester, "will burn, at the most, only three or four minutes, and you will appreciate the fact that if the Mystery Man intends to ride forth on a very dark night, he can thus make himself appear and disappear again with startling suddenness. A night like this is not the best time for the exhibition."

"I imagine not," said Nick.

"When I said, a minute ago, that the Mystery Man was myself in those days, I meant that I assumed the character part of the time, while at others Bill Hawks did so."

"And did you succeed in frightening your cousin?" asked Nick.

"He was frightened almost out of his wits the first time the Mystery Man appeared, and he never entirely recovered from the effects of that fright. I mean that he did not recover, for it always frightened him as you saw it do to-night.

"We had practised the thing at odd intervals for about a year, when I became tired of it and left it solely to Hawks, cautioning him at the same time to keep it up at intervals so that my cousin would not recover entirely from the effect the apparition had had upon him."

"I see."

"About a year before I sold out my interest in this ranch and went North, Bill Hawks mysteriously disappeared. From that day to this I have never succeeded in getting any trace of him whatever, and, strangely enough, with him disappeared the horse he had been in the habit of riding when he played the character of the Mystery Man, together with the paraphernalia he used."

"And you have never seen him since that time?" asked Nick.

"No."

"Nor heard of him?"

"No."

"And have no idea what became of him?"

"None whatever."

"And did you never assume the character of the Mystery Man after the disappearance of Hawks?"

"Never."

"So that from the time of his disappearance until to-night you have known nothing about the Mystery Man?"

"The fact is, that I had forgotten it entirely until I heard Morales use the expression to-night."

"How, then, do you explain the apparition of to-night?"

"I don't explain it and can't explain it unless Hawks had some confederate at the time, to whom he explained the mystery, and who has now revived it."

"Is there among these cowboys who are here any one, save Morales, whom you remember to have been here at that time?"

"I haven't seen a face among them all that I recognize."

The detective sat silent for a moment gazing off across the plains in every direction meditatively, and presently he said:

"This is rather a bright night, Chester. Sitting here where we do, we can see for long distances around us in any direction."

"Yes."

"Well, suppose for the moment you were the Mystery Man of to-night, yourself; that you rode past the veranda as he did and swept around the corner of the house into obscurity, precisely as he accomplished it."

"Yes."

"How then, would you have succeeded in getting out of sight as quickly as he did?"

"I have been expecting that question," said Chester.

"When Hawks played the character, he realized that there must be a place in which to disappear, and on this treeless plain that was quite difficult of achievement. He overcame it, however, by excavating a huge hole on the opposite side of that mound yonder, just where you can observe that thick bunch of mesquite from where we stand. It was Hawks' method, and mine also when I played the part, to ride around to the other side of that mound and dash through the mesquite into the excavation I have just described; conceal the saddle and the wire framework in a place that had been provided for the purpose, turn the horse loose with a slap on his flank:—and as at that time we raised many horses here and they all ran loose over the range, this particular horse, who was trained, of course, for the work he had to do, lost no time in getting back into the bunch.

"And another thing, Carter, that particular horse was one which was supposed by everybody else on the ranch, save Hawks and me, to be unbroken."

The detective nodded, smiled, and said:

"It was a very clever arrangement, Chester, but the interesting question now is, after concealing the saddle and framework and turning the horse loose to rejoin the

others that were roaming over the range, what became of you or of Hawks?"

"You must remember," responded Chester, "that we never undertook any impersonation of the Mystery Man, save on a very dark night, usually a drizzling one if it were possible, although that is of rare occurrence here. It was an easy matter for either one of us, from that spot over there, to get back to the house again, and I ought to tell you that the Mexican cowboys, as well as my cousin, were so filled with superstitious terror at every reappearance of the apparition that/ pursuit was never thought of."

The detective peered across the plain toward the mound, half-surrounded by the grove of mesquite and said:

"It's likely, then, that the one who is playing the Mystery Man now resorts to the same place of concealment."

"It would seem so," assented Chester, "since, if he knows how the Mystery Man is created, it's quite likely he also knows of the old hiding-place."

"You cannot suggest at all whom you think it might be who is now playing the Mystery Man?" asked Nick.

"No, I haven't an idea."

"Do you think by any possibility it might be Hawks, returned?"

"I doubt it. Hawks was devoted to me; he disappeared years ago and has never been seen or heard from since."

"Anyhow," said the detective, with quiet decision "we'll ride over to that little butte, as they would identify it farther north, and investigate. We know that the Mystery Man disappeared in that direction and I have an idea we may get some trace of him there."

"I, also," said Chester; "and I have another idea to go with it."

"What is that?" asked Nick.

"It is that the present Mystery Man is none other than Buck Hawkins."

Nick Carter smiled grimly and replied:

"The same idea has suggested itself to me; come on."

And they rode forward together toward the grove of mesquite.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET OF MESQUITE BUTTE.

The distance that they had to traverse before reaching the butte was approximately half a mile, and they permitted their horses to walk in order that they might converse freely together on the way.

"Tell me something more about Bill Hawks; where he came from, and his disappearance, and what happened," said the detective.

"Bill Hawks was a character," said Chester musingly. "He was almost as big a man as Buck Hawkins, and in character and disposition was very much like him; there, however, the resemblance ends. He came to me one evening just before sunset, when I was out on the range alone, where I had been trying vainly for upward of an hour to rope a horse that had succeeded in dodging me over and over again. You know there are horses that will do that; they get wise to the tricks of the rope-thrower."

"Yes," said Nick.

"I was about to give up the contest, and acknowledge myself beaten, when this Bill Hawks appeared, riding a jaded animal, himself almost as jaded as his mount; but he was grinning at me as he came forward and called out: 'If you'll let me have a chance at that old-timer, I think I can rope the cayuse for you, only you'll have to let me have your horse to do it; mine is done up.'

"I was willing enough, Carter; to do so, you may be sure, and it wasn't five minutes later before he had captured the animal for me; and then when he rode back to me he said: 'If you think I'm worth my salt, stranger, I wouldn't mind taking a temporary job from you.'

"That began my acquaintance with Bill Hawks. I only know that he came down here from somewhere in the North; Montana or Idaho, I think, and from remarks he made after that, he had met with some kind of difficulty up North from which he had to flee.

"But I quickly discovered that I could trust the man, and little by little he became my confidential aid.

"Then, as I have already described, we inaugurated the appearance of the Mystery Man and made him appear from time to time during a lapse of about two years.

"Then, Carter, Bill Hawks disappeared as suddenly and as mysteriously as he came. I tried in every way to get some trace of him, but could not do so. The excavation in the mound we are approaching told me nothing, and I must confess to you that until to-night Bill Hawks and the Mystery Man had faded almost entirely from my recollection.

"That is the story in a nutshell."

They rode on in silence after that, for both were thinking deeply, and presently halted at the outer edge of the grove of mesquite.

"If you will sit here and hold my horse," said Nick, "I will go forward and investigate, if you will first describe to me as well as you can how I am to find the hiding-place you have mentioned."

Chester did so, and the detective went silently and swiftly forward, for the moon, which came down almost vertically, lighted his way sufficiently, even in the midst of that dense grove.

And presently he came to the excavation that had been described and paused directly in front of it in order to reconnoiter a little and to listen before he should plunge

into the black darkness of the hole that was in front of him.

He was in the act of stepping forward, and had actually raised one foot from the ground to do so, when, with a rush from the intense darkness in front of him, a huge body hurled itself forward full upon him, before he could do anything to protect himself from the attack, and in another instant the detective and the man who had attacked him were rolling over and over on the ground with their arms clenched tightly around each other and without it occurring to either of them to shout out a warning of that almost silent struggle that was taking place.

We, who are familiar with Nick Carter's experiences, know of his wonderful strength and agility; but it appeared as if for once, at least, he had almost found his match.

The man who had attacked the detective was larger and heavier than he, and the attack had been so sudden that Nick forgot for the moment the suspicion he had voiced in his conversation with Chester, to the effect that he would not be surprised if the character of the Mystery Man had been taken by Buck Hawkins.

And it must be remembered that Nick was disguised in the charra costume of a Mexican; that his skin was stained, and that he looked exactly like a half-breed vaquero; also we must remember that Nick Carter was always so thorough in the preparation of any disguise he assumed, that even his best friends were deceived, no matter how bright the light.

But as the detective struggled with the man who had attacked him, and while they rolled over and over together on the ground, crashing against the brush that surrounded them and breathing hard, but still without making noise enough to reach the ears of Chester where he waited with the horses, Nick remembered that this man might possibly be Buck Hawkins.

And even as the thought came to him, a softly muttered oath, in the well-known voice of Buck Hawkins, reached him.

"Buck!" he exclaimed, "what in the world are you fighting me for?"

"Jumping blazes!" exclaimed Buck in reply, and each man released his hold upon the other and they both got upon their feet staring and grinning at each other in the moonlight.

"I reckoned as how you were well on your way to New York," said Buck, with his usual drawl and apparently not in the least flurried by the violent exercise of the past few moments.

"And I figured it out that you were dead by this time, Buck," retorted Nick. "You would be if you had your deserts for leaving me in the way you did."

Buck's reply was a broader grin than before; but he asked:

"Since when have you been a half-breed cow-puncher, Nick?"

"Since you deserted," was the quick retort.

Buck hung his head for a moment in contrition, but then straightening up for a moment, he replied:

"Well, mebbe I did desert. Mebbe you're right in saying that I had no right to leave you in the way I did. Mebbe I was all wrong in coming back here on a still hunt for that man Brown Chet, but I tell you, Nick, and I give it to you straight, that I never would have had a moment's peace in my whole life if I had let that gazabo go without letting him know that I intended to get even with him somehow."

"What did you intend to do?" asked Nick.

"Well, I didn't have it cut out that I was goin' to kill him. I knew you wouldn't like that, Nick, and I didn't intend to do anything to hurt his feelings; but I was dead set, and I am yet, on squaring up accounts with him somehow, and, to tell you the truth, I hadn't made up my mind, and I haven't yet, just how to do it."

"But you have some sort of idea?"

"Oh, well, I figured I would sneak around this range for a while, knowing that some day Brown Chet would wander off by his lonesome where I could take his trail and meet up with him where there weren't any spectators lookin' on and keepin' tabs on what might happen. I reckon, Nick, I'm just waitin' for that kind of an opportunity."

"And then?"

"Well, then, Nick, as the writers express it, I allowed that I'd let circumstances figure it out for themselves. It was a toss-up whether I'd ask Brown Chet to fight me with pistols or with fists, or if I'd just naturally rope him and take him into camp somewhere and talk to him like a long-lost son."

The detective laughed softly, and then, raising his voice so that it would carry so far as to where Chester was awaiting him, he called out:

"Oh, Chester, come here, and bring the horses with you!"

"Hello!" muttered Buck, in surprise. "Do you mean to tell me, Nick, that that other greaser chap is Godfrey Chester?"

"Sure!" replied the detective.

"Well, he's got more sand than I thought."

"He's got sand enough," said Nick, "and here he is."

and Chester, leading both horses, came into the little open space in the moonlight where our two friends were standing.

"Got him, Carter?" asked Godfrey Chester.

"We've got each other. We guessed right about you, Chester; it's Buck Hawkins."

"Good!"

Nick turned to Hawkins again then, and demanded:

"Now, you fire-eating cowboy-miner, open up your

heart and tell us what you knew about the Mystery Man, how to play the part, and since when you have known about the hiding-place of the paraphernalia that goes with it."

Buck stared for a moment, and then he laughed.

"So you know about it, too, do you?" he exclaimed.

"Rather!" said Nick.

"Well," continued Buck, after a pause, "it isn't strange that I know all about it, since it was my own brother that created it years ago, and who told me about it long afterward. You see, Nick, he killed a man in Idaho a number of years ago, and had to skip out, and he came down here into this country, and got a job on 7-Up Ranch. I didn't see him for years after that, and when he did show up finally, long after his escape from Idaho, he was almost dead with consumption, and he told me something of his experiences; among them, he told me about this Mystery-man business, but I'll give you my word, Nick, that I never thought a word about it or remembered it at all until I was on my way back here from St. John after I deserted you.

"But then it all came back to me, and I remembered everything he had told me, so it wasn't much trouble for me to find this spot here, where he used to hide up his things. There are wire fences enough around this country to make the manufacture of the framework that is necessary to the character, dead easy.

"Last night it was dark, and I made my first appearance as the Mystery Man, and I pledge you my word that I scared the whole outfit almost to the point of making them locoed. To-night was my second appearance, and I reckon you saw that, since you are here now."

CHAPTER VII.

THE POISONED DRAFT.

"Where do you get food, and where do you hide yourself during the day?" the detective asked of his friend, then.

"You must remember," replied Buck, "that I've only been here one day as yet; one day and two nights, and that I brought a lot of grub with me; or, perhaps, Chapman didn't tell you that."

"But you couldn't expect that grub to last you always, and this isn't a very secure place to hide in," Nick insisted.

"Well, I didn't intend to stay here always. When you arrived up just now, that is, when I saw you and Chester riding through the moonlight toward me, I was just on the point of sneaking back toward the ranch, but when I saw you coming, and you must know that I took you for two of that outfit over yonder, I just naturally waited to see what you were up to."

The detective was silent a moment, and then he said:

"Well, Buck, Mr. Chester procured these costumes, assumed these disguises, and came all the way back here just because we knew you were in serious danger if you remained here alone, and that there was about a thousand chances to one that you would never get away from here alive. Now that we have got here and have found you without any one being the wiser, I want you to return with us and take the train back to New York."

Buck shut his jaws tightly together and then very slowly and deliberately he replied:

"Without meaning any disrespect to you or to Mr. Chester, Nick, without intending any offense whatever, and at the same time expressing my reluctance to go against your advice or your wishes, I want you to understand that I mean it when I say I'll see you in Guinea first."

Nick laughed outright, and so did Chester. It was quite plain that the detective had expected just some such reply as this one.

"What do you want to do?" he asked of Buck.

"I want to do what I came out here to do."

"What is that?"

"I want to capture Brown Chet, and have my little interview with him."

"What do you propose to do with him when you have accomplished that?"

"I just now told you that I ain't made up my mind about it yet."

"How do you think you can accomplish it?"

"You can search me, if any one should ask you, but accomplish it, somehow, I will, though he has four times as many half-breed cutthroats in his outfit as he has got. I reckon I was figuring it about this way; to scare them galley west with the Mystery Man."

"Well, suppose we should leave you here alone, how do you figure that you can find food and keep yourself concealed long enough and thoroughly enough to carry out your plans successfully?"

"Nick, I'm a chap that never crossed bridges till I got to them, and I never hesitated to burn one behind me if I thought it was necessary or would help me an inch or two along the trail I was traveling. I'm here and I'm going to stay. You and Chester can figure that out just as you darn please, but it's the surest thing you know! Of course I'd like to have you two with me, and likewise, of course, there ain't much chance for all three of us to hide up in this here cache, but from the appearance of things, it strikes me you are what they call 'personæ gratuitus' over to the ranch-house, and if you do elect to stay here a little while and help me out, it'll be like living on a farm for you to supply me with grub and other necessaries while I finish out this play of the Mystery Man."

The detective looked toward Chester, who nodded his head affirmatively, and then he answered:

"If you'll promise me, Buck, to do no killing unless you are driven into a corner where you have to in order to save your life, Chester and I will see you through."

"There are my two hands on it!" said Buck, reaching out toward both men at the same time. "I ain't looking for gore, Nick; I'm just trying to ease my conscience over a debt that I owe that black-hearted gazabo over yonder. You go back to the ranch-house and live there with the outfit and leave me to do the Mystery-man act until I see a chance to get Mr. Brown Chet off to one side where I can talk theology to him for a little while, in case I haven't scared him to death in the meantime."

"And food?" asked Nick. "What about that?"

"I've got enough to last me for three days more, and I've got enough for the horse, too; and I reckon that Mr. Chester has told you that there's as nice a little spring of water in this here hummock as ever spouted out of the earth."

"That's quite true!"

"So, you see," continued the miner, "I'm not up against it very hard, when all is considered, and if you two will agree to meet me out here at midnight the third night after this one, if something hasn't happened in the meantime to bring this matter to an end, I give you my word on the dictionary that I'll throw up the sponge and go back East with you."

"Agreed!" said Nick.

"Agreed!" exclaimed Chester.

Twenty minutes later Nick Carter and Godfrey Chester rode back slowly over the plain toward the ranch-house, and when finally they had turned their horses into the corral, had stowed their saddles and bridles away in their proper places, and walked leisurely toward the veranda, neither of them was surprised to find that Brown Chet and Diego Morales were seated there awaiting them.

"Oh!" exclaimed the latter, speaking rapidly in the Spanish language, "you have returned, have you two?"

"As you see," responded Nick calmly and leisurely, rolling himself a cigarette, which was a habit he had been compelled to adopt in order to carry out the character he had assumed. "We are here, señors."

"And the Mystery Man?" said Morales. "Did you see him?"

"We saw him," replied the detective, for it had already been agreed between him and Chester that he should do the talking.

"You saw him?" exclaimed Brown Chet eagerly, half-starting from his chair and then sinking back upon it.

"We saw him," repeated Nick.

"Where?"

Nick waved his hand toward the southward.

"Yonder," he said. "Perhaps two or three miles away —perhaps not as far as that."

"And you—you—" asked Morales.

"No, it was useless."

"Where is he now?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"Was he all aflame as when we saw him pass this door?" demanded Brown Chet.

"Have you ever seen him when he wasn't a mass of flame?" asked Nick, in reply.

"And you permitted him to escape?"

"We were glad enough to escape ourselves."

Morales indulged in a sneering laugh.

"And yet you told me only a little while ago," he said, "that you are afraid of nothing, living or dead."

"'Fire is neither alive nor dead,'" replied Nick, using a Spanish proverb, "and I am afraid of fire when it comes too close."

The detective saw that Morales and Brown Chet exchanged furtive glances at this moment, and then the former got slowly upon his feet with an entire change of manner as well as subject, and remarked:

"You must be hungry, *amigos*."

"We are as hungry as wolves," said Nick.

"Come inside, then; food is prepared, and waiting for you."

Our two friends followed the ranchero and his superintendent into the house, and were conducted into the room where Nick, not so very long before that time, had engaged in a short but desperate struggle with Brown Chet; and here Morales directed that they seat themselves at the table, whereupon there was enough food for half a dozen hungry men and with it a pot of steaming coffee, the aroma of which filled the place.

Nick had told the truth when he asserted that they were as hungry as wolves, and without comment they attacked the food and the coffee at once, neither of them ever dreaming that their strange arrival at the ranch had created any suspicion or that Morales and his employer might have conjured up any reason for rendering them helpless.

Nick noticed that the coffee was exceedingly strong and somewhat bitter, but he swallowed his first cup of it almost at a single draft, and was in the act of preparing himself a second one, when suddenly his head began to swim, and he realized on the instant that he had been drugged, and that he had acted very incautiously in submitting himself to such a circumstance.

He started to his feet, groping with his hand toward his holster, and even as he did so, Chester pitched forward upon his face on the floor, as if he had been shot.

The poison, or the drug, whichever it was that Nick had swallowed, worked so quickly and so certainly that try as he might, he could not reach his hand to his holster; objects in the room swam and danced before his eyes; a filmy veil seemed to settle down over his vision, and through it he saw dimly the leering face of Diego Morales regarding him exultingly, for the latter was standing on the opposite side of the room, arms folded across his chest,

calmly watching the effect of the dose he had administered.

And then everything became black before Nick Carter's eyes, and it seemed to him as if the floor of the room suddenly heaved upward and smote him in the face, and then all was blank.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ANGEL UNAWARES.

When Nick Carter opened his eyes to consciousness, he was alone.

Daylight shone in dimly around him, rendering the place in which he found himself obscurely visible, and he saw that he was within the four walls of an adobe room which could not have been more than eight feet in extent in either direction.

He was lying upon his back upon a packed earthen floor, gazing at the ceiling, which was so low that he knew that he could barely have stood erect beneath it, had it been possible for him to get upon his feet.

But this was quite impossible, since in addition to the fact that his ankles and his wrists were tightly bound by lits of horsehair lariat, other lengths of the almost unbreakable rope were stretched across him and pegged fast to the ground on either side of him, one across his throat where it pressed tightly against it; a second across his chest, and a third and fourth across his legs above and below his knees.

He was securely held, therefore, upon the ground, as if a mold of cement or plaster of Paris had been cast around him.

The light that has been mentioned entered through a hole in one corner of the room of the hut; a hole that was less than a foot square and which doubtless was intended for the escape of smoke from the inside and which had now been left open to provide him with air. He smiled grimly as he cast his eyes about him, realizing that he was literally confined in the smoke-house of the ranch, where beef and pork and other meats were cured.

His head ached frightfully; his mouth was parched, and his tongue was swollen, and he was conscious of shooting pains through his legs and arms and body that were almost unbearable.

How long a time had elapsed since he had partaken of that drugged coffee, he had no idea, more than to be sure that it was now broad daylight, and that it had still wanted some minutes of midnight when he drank it.

He wondered if Godfrey Chester was in the room with him, for owing to the horsehair rope that was stretched across his throat from pegs on either side he could not turn his head; but after a moment he called out:

"Hector, are you there?"

There was no response, and the detective knew that either he was alone in the place or that Chester was still unconscious from the effects of the drug he had swallowed.

It was probable that he was alone, just as it was also more than likely that Godfrey Chester was dead.

The detective already knew enough of the character and methods of Brown Chet to realize that having his cousin once more in his power, with the prospect of possessing himself of Godfrey Chester's fortune, Brown Chet would not let him live a moment longer than was necessary for his own safety.

Nick Carter possessed a spirit that was never dismayed. Under the most adverse conditions he was never without hope of escape, and now, instead of lamenting upon his misfortune in getting into this predicament, he began to cast about him for methods and means by which he might free himself.

Taking the situation into consideration, this seemed to be almost impossible, for a rope that is made of braided horsehair is tougher than wire itself. It will not stretch; water will not cause it to shrink, and the strength of a powerful horse is insufficient to break it.

It was several moments after he first opened his eyes before he was capable of thinking connectedly, and these things that we have already described, he studied out piece by piece and one by one during an interval that covered almost half an hour.

He was lying, as has been explained, flat on his back, and his wrists, where they were bound together, rested across his body at his waist.

It was evident that the men who had fastened him there were experts at the craft, for try as he might he found it impossible to move even his fingers without suffering excruciating pain as a consequence.

He permitted, for what seemed to him an interminable time, and which was in reality almost an hour, to pass along thus in utter silence, while with all the mental power he possessed he strove to calm his mind, to meet the existing emergency; but think as he might upon it, he could not conjure up a single suggestion which might ultimately liberate him.

And then, just as he was on the point of shouting out lustily in the hope that the noise he made would bring some one to him, the faint light that was already in the room almost disappeared, and, raising his eyes quickly to the small square opening in the corner of the roof, he discovered a pair of eyes that were gazing down earnestly upon him.

The position of the person who was looking into the room was such that it was impossible for Nick to see much more than the eyes, and they regarded him steadily with that same wondering expression that he had noticed at first.

Then, to Nick's amazement, and just as he was about to call out a question to whoever it was, a warning hiss came to him through the aperture, and it was followed

by a sentence spoken in so low a tone as scarcely to be intelligible to the detective, which was:

"Be quiet; I will come again."

The words were uttered in Spanish and in a voice so soft and low as barely to reach the ears of the detective, but there was something about the timbre of it to suggest that the words were spoken by a youth.

As soon as the words were uttered, the face disappeared from the opening, and the detective was again alone with his thoughts, which, it may be imagined, were pleasanter and more hopeful than they had been before.

He wished that some one might bring him a drink of water, and there were many times while he waited impatiently for the reappearance of the face, that it required all his will-power to refrain from calling out and demanding it; but he did refrain, and so the minutes passed into an hour and from an hour into two or three of them.

Nick was conscious at last that the light was becoming perceptibly dimmer in the room in which he was confined, and that, therefore, the day was passing into evening, and but for this fact he would have called out for aid and for water in spite of all his determination to refrain from doing so; but the vision of the face at the opening had given him hope, and now, with the gradual disappearance of daylight, he reasoned that whoever it was who had been there, that person was only waiting for darkness to fall in order to come to his rescue.

Darkness comes quickly in that region when once the sun has set; twilight is scarcely worthy of the name, for there is almost none at all.

Nick tried to kill time by counting seconds and striving to remember minutes as they passed and to keep count of them; and thus he was able to control himself while the light faded out almost entirely through the hole in the corner of the roof until he could only discern a dim blur where it was located.

Night had fallen.

Again the minutes dragged all too slowly, but at last Nick Carter's heart leaped with delight when the voice came to him again through the opening in the roof.

"Señor!" it said to him in a half-whisper. "Speak to me only loud enough for me to hear. Are you awake and conscious?"

The words were spoken in Spanish and Nick replied in the same language:

"I am, thank you."

"Is it possible for you to move?"

"I cannot move by so much as the fraction of an inch," replied the detective.

"Then wait where you are with patience; I will find a way to come to you. Be sure of one thing, and that is that you cannot hear me utter a word or a sound of any kind, and when I have at last succeeded in setting you free, as I shall do, you must follow me as silently as a shadow and without a word. Will you do that?"

"I certainly will," replied Nick.

"No questions, remember; no noise; silence, stealth, and swiftness."

"I doubt," said Nick," if I will be able to move with swiftness, if at all."

"Why? Are you wounded?"

"No, my young friend, but I have been bound here so long a time that I am benumbed by it; however, I will do the best I can. But come, please, as soon as you can."

"Yes, señor, as soon as I can. Be patient; be brave."

It was perhaps half an hour later when Nick detected a grinding, grating sound from the other side of the adobe wall where his head almost touched it, but he understood at once that the noise was made by his would-be rescuer, who was digging through the bricks of sun-baked mud with some sharp instrument, probably a knife.

And, oh, how he listened for every repetition of that sound, wondering with each one that came to him how much farther the implement had pierced into the mud wall.

Sometimes it ceased altogether, and there would be an interval of a moment or several moments of utter silence; but then the digging would be resumed again, and once more Nick Carter would realize that rescue was at hand.

At last the moment came when he knew that a hole had been made through the wall, and it was only a minute later when he felt the touch of a hand upon his forehead and the softness of delicate fingers as they searched across his features.

The hand was withdrawn again, and once more the digging at the hole began.

But now it was possible to use a larger implement so that the aperture was rapidly increasing in size, and at last, after a time that had seemed to Nick Carter to consume hours, he heard the scraping sound made by a slight and slender body as it forced itself through the aperture that had been made in the adobe hut.

The darkness was so intense that Nick could see nothing at all, and remembering his instructions, he scarcely breathed in his effort to remain silent.

But he felt the hands of the stranger gliding over him; he felt the relaxation of his body and of his arms and legs as the ropes that bound him were cut, and at last the moment came when he knew he was free.

And then with a great effort he managed, assisted by this unknown stranger, to roll himself over and then over again and sit upright; then to rub himself vigorously and at last to struggle to his knees and then to his feet; and then he was pressed down upon his knees again before the opening in the wall, and he heard the whispered words from lips that almost touched his ear:

"Follow me!"

CHAPTER IX.

NITA THE MYSTERIOUS.

Outside the hut the night was almost as dark as the interior of Nick Carter's prison house had been, but his guide placed a hand upon his arm and guided him swiftly away through the blackness, presently urging him forward until they were running along side by side without Nick having the least idea whither they were bound.

But he had given his word to this stranger, who had come to his aid so fortunately, that he would not speak and would make no sound whatever until he received permission to do so; and he could not very well have stopped short and demanded to know where they were going without breaking his word.

After a little, when Nick was almost breathless, for it must be remembered that having been bound and incapable of motion for so long a time, his muscles were cramped and sore, they came to a walk again, although his companion continued to urge him forward swiftly and Nick knew or rather believed that they must be leaving the immediate neighborhood of the ranch-house.

But the darkness was almost impenetrable. Immense banks of clouds surcharged with moisture had gloomed down over the earth so closely as to shut out every ray of light from the heavens, and the detective could not remember that he had ever experienced a darker night.

He believed that all of half an hour must have elapsed when something that was even blacker than the night itself loomed in front of them, and a moment later he knew that they were passing through some sort of brush or wooded growth, and then, when his feet began to traverse rough and stony ground, he guessed instinctively that they were at the butte where he and Chester had held their interview with Buck Hawkins.

"I will let you speak presently," said his companion, in a voice that was almost a whisper, but which sounded strangely soft and interesting, nevertheless; so much so that the detective thought for a moment that it was a woman or a girl who had spoken to him, and then laughed at himself for entertaining the idea. Thus far he had seen no sign of a woman about the ranch, and he doubted very much if there was one there.

But whoever it was who guided him to the butte that person was now busily engaged in procuring a light which presently glowed from the interior of the excavation that had been described to him by Godfrey Chester, but which he had never entered, although on one occasion he had stood where he now was, at the mouth of it.

"Come inside," said the voice from behind the rock which almost concealed the opening as he stepped forward quickly and entered; then he halted abruptly, surprised by the expression of there words.

It was a beautiful girl who was standing in front of him gazing up into his face with a smile in her eyes and upon her lips; a girl with a tint of olive in her skin and the glow of youth on her cheeks; a girl with eyes as black as sloe berries, which reflected the rays of the lamp she had lighted and placed in a niche of that artificial cavern.

She was tall for her age, Nick thought, for the short Mexican skirt that she wore and the beaded and embroidered jacket and the long braids of hair that hung down over her shoulders and back gave him the impression that she was only a child; yet she seemed tall, though slender and as lithe and winsome and graceful as a young panther cub.

There was no doubt in Nick's mind that she was a Mexican or possibly a half-breed, although he could not remember that he had ever seen one of that race who possessed such delicate refined features, such mobile lips, and such intelligent eyes.

"Who are you, child?" he asked her, and she laughed in a low tone before she replied; then she said:

"There will be time enough to tell you that, Mr. Carter, presently when we have discussed other things that are of much more interest to you now."

He stared at her in utter amazement.

He had addressed his question to her, and she had replied to him in English and with words and enunciation which proclaimed at once both refinement and education.

"You amaze me," he could not help saying.

"I expect to surprise you even more before very long," she responded.

"How did you know I was in that small prison house?" he asked.

"I saw you taken there this morning, and I have been watching ever since to find an opportunity of assuring you that as soon as it was possible to do so I would try to liberate you."

"It was awfully kind of you," said Nick. "Do you live here on the ranch?"

"Yes—for the present, I do."

"Have you any idea what has become of the two friends—or perhaps you don't know that there are two here with me."

"Oh, yes, I know all about it, Mr. Carter."

"Do you know what has become of them, then?"

"No, save that they are prisoners—if they are still alive."

"Prisoners in the ranch-house, do you mean?"

"Yes; they have not been brought out of it, because I have watched."

"Can you tell me how long ago it was that I was drugged with that coffee; was it last night, twenty-four hours ago?"

"Yes, it was last night! You and Mr. Chester, when you returned to the house from this cavern where you met your other friend, were taken inside by Don Diego to have something to eat. It was then that you were both rendered unconscious by something he had put in the coffee, and this morning, soon after daylight, you were

taken outside and put into the little adobe hut from which I just rescued you."

"And the others?" said Nick.

"Alas, sir, I know nothing whatever about the fate of the others. I am not permitted to enter the ranch-house, you know; at least, I am not supposed to do so, although I have eluded them many times and entered it."

"Could you do so again?" asked Nick.

"I think so."

"Could you do it to-night?"

"Possibly."

"Will you make the effort?"

"If you desire it."

"Will you act as my guide and take me with you?"

"If you deem it wise and prudent."

"Why would it not be?" asked Nick. "It seems to me it would be much more wise and prudent for me to go with you than for you to go alone."

She shook her head in doubt.

"I am not so sure of that," she said. "You have been about sixteen hours bound and gagged and helpless, utterly without motion; your muscles are strained and weak; I know it, although you will not admit it, and therefore do you think if we entered that house together and anything happened there that you are in a condition to face the consequences?"

"Quite so," returned Nick, and he smiled grimly. "I am ready to face any circumstances which Diego Morales and his master, Brown Chet, can create."

"May I ask why you wish to go there now?" she insisted.

"In search of my own friends, of course. I must know at once what has become of them, and that reminds me that there is one thing that I have not asked you yet which perhaps you can tell me."

"What is it, Mr. Carter?"

"How does it happen that Buck Hawkins was also captured? He wasn't with us to be drugged by the coffee."

"That was an accident," she replied. "It was an hour after you and Mr. Chester were taken when he asked me the same question that you just did——"

"What's that?" exclaimed the detective. "Do you mean to tell me that Buck Hawkins knew about me?"

"Certainly he did."

"Did he know about you at the same time I was talking with him last night?"

"Yes."

"But, child, he said things which led me to believe that Chester and I were the only persons who suspected his appearance about the ranch."

"Quite true," she replied to him. "But I had made him promise me on his solemn word of honor that he would tell nobody that I had seen and talked with him. I would not have included you in that prohibition had I known that you were here at the time I asked him to make the promise, but I didn't; I asked it and he kept it."

"I see," said Nick. "Now, will you please tell me about the accident which resulted in his capture?"

"He asked me, as you have done, if I could enter the house. He requested me to show him the way there, which I consented to do, and it was while we were prowling about inside the building that he discovered what had happened to you and to Mr. Chester."

"How did he do that?" asked Nick.

"By peering into the room where you were after you had been drugged. You were both stretched upon the floor and were bound hand and foot, although you were not gagged at that time. But Mr. Hawkins saw you, and somehow he understood what had happened. He was for dashing into the room at once to your rescue, and I think he would have done so despite my entreaties to the contrary had it not been at that instant three of the men who are employed here entered it, thus making the odds of the fight one to five—for, of course, I don't count."

"Well, what happened then?" asked the detective.

"In his eagerness he betrayed himself. He made a noise that they heard and they rushed out upon him so suddenly that I barely had time to escape unseen, but you must know it resulted in his capture, and that is how they got all three of you at once."

"Are you sure you were not seen?" asked Nick.

"Oh, yes, quite so, and even if I had been there would have been no trouble about it, for I am known about the ranch, although I don't live in the ranch-house itself."

"I understand," said Nick. "You will tell me presently who you are, won't you?"

"Yes; by and by."

"Have you any idea, child, in what room of that house Chester and Hawkins are confined?"

"No more than you, Mr. Carter. I have not been inside of it since I left Mr. Hawkins there."

"And are you willing to take me there now to show me an easy way inside, and will you promise to wait outside the house while I go in? for I don't wish to thrust you into danger unnecessarily."

She shook her head.

"I will take you there by and by, Mr. Carter, but not yet. It is too early; far too early. The evening is young yet, and it will not be safe for you to attempt what you mean to do until midnight, or even later."

"I guess you are right about that," admitted the detective. "Won't you give me some idea of what time it is now? Those villains have taken my watch away from me."

"It is, I should think, not yet ten o'clock."

"In that case we have a good two hours' wait," grumbled Nick.

"Yes."

"Then now you improve the time that intervenes by telling me who you are?"

"Why are you so anxious to know that?"

"Because you seem strangely out of place here, child, with your dark, inscrutable face, your intelligent eyes, your every evidence of education and refinement: this seems no place for such as you, no proper place to have found you. You don't belong here, I am certain of that, just as I am almost certain that you have a purpose in being here as much as I have."

"It is true," she murmured, "but I need not tell you who I am yet, save that I have a right here, even though, as you have said, I don't belong here."

The two hours or more that intervened before it was time to make the effort to enter the house and rescue the two prisoners who were there dragged along slowly enough; but they were gone at last, and the moment came when they set out, the girl again leading the way.

She had told the detective that he might address her as Nita, the diminutive for Juanita, but she had volunteered no further information concerning herself or her appearance there, and the detective had not urged her further.

When they reached the house, she led the way to the rear door of it, where she directed him to upraise one of the windows and then to hold his hand so that she might step upon it.

In a moment more she had passed inside and presently she unfastened the door and threw it open for him to ente..

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN IN THE BED.

The moment the detective was inside the house he reached out his hand and rested it upon Nita's shoulder; then he bent forward and whispered in her ear:

"Remember what you promised me; you are to wait outside."

"No," she replied, also in a whisper. "I didn't promise you I would do that. You asked me, but I didn't promise. I am going to remain inside, for even though I am a girl it is more than likely that I may be of assistance to you, and it is also certain that I will come to no harm by following you."

For just one instant a touch of suspicion against the girl occurred to the detective, but he dismissed it the instant it occurred to him, and fixing the door on the latch so that he could throw it open and use it as a means of escape in an instant if the necessity arose to do so, he whispered to her again:

"Take me now to the room where you think my friends may be, even though you don't know."

"Come," she whispered back to him.

With the tips of his fingers resting lightly upon her shoulders, in order that he might follow her through the darkness, they made their way slowly along the hall and up a flight of stairs—the same stairs that Nick thought he had ascended on that former occasion of his visit to this house from which he and Buck Hawkins and Godfrey Chester had escaped so narrowly; and he wondered if he should find his own friends in the same room where they had been confined at that time.

He knew now where he was, for he remembered the interior of the house perfectly, and he stopped here long enough to tell her so in a whisper, and to put her behind him while he took the lead.

But there was no one in the room he remembered nor in any room that opened off from that wide entry at the top of the stairs.

They peered into all of them one after another, but nowhere was there a sign of human presence.

"Wait here," he said presently, and then he opened the door which led into the narrow passage which communicated in turn with the private quarters of Brown Chet, that room which was provided with a secret entrance from the outside through which he had once made his escape.

It occurred to him now that no matter where Chester and Hawkins might be there was little doubt that Brown Chet would be in that room in bed and probably asleep and that there would never be a better chance of overpowering him and compelling him to tell what he had done with the others.

Nita obeyed when he told her to wait, but she uttered a whispered word of caution which he acknowledged, and then he left her and traversed the hall swiftly.

The door through which he wished to pass was locked on the inner side, he discovered, and he had no tools about him with which he could pick the lock or force the door, for after he was drugged he had also been robbed of everything he possessed, save the clothing he wore.

For a moment he hesitated, and then with sudden resolution he seized the knob of the door in both hands, and raising his right knee, pressed it solidly against the spot just where he knew the bolt of the lock to be set.

To those who have attempted it and know exactly how it is done, this is the easiest and the quickest way of forcing a door that is locked, although it must not be understood to be noiseless, since there is always the ripping and tearing of the fastenings that surround the bolt.

But there is no shock or jar such as would result from a blow, and it is a fact that the noise thus made will rarely penetrate beyond the interior of the room into which the objective door is supposed to open.

Having braced himself for the effort, the detective threw his entire weight forcibly forward, and all of his great strength with it, so that the door after one instant of slumbering resistance gave way before the pressure and opened, carrying with it a section of the casing to which it had been fastened, and to Nick's relief very little noise resulted.

He hesitated on the threshold for a moment, listening, but no sound came to him from the interior of the room, and presently he stepped forward again cautiously, with every sense upon the alert, and with every muscle and fiber in his being tensioned to the point of instant utility.

Nothing obstructed him, however. There was no indication that the noise of the opening of the door had been overheard or indeed that the man Nick Carter sought was present in the room at all.

He remembered the location of the bed from that brief glance he had obtained of the room when he passed through it once before, and now he tiptoed toward it slowly and cautiously with his hands outstretched to warn him of any obstacle that might be in his pathway.

Presently he brought up against the bedside, and then with a touch as delicate as if he had used a feather instead of his finger-tips, he felt across the clothing of the bed inch by inch until he discovered that there was a person there—a person whom he had no doubt was Brown Chet himself.

The detective bent forward a little nearer and listened, and he could hear indistinctly the regular breathing of a sleeping person.

After that he straightened up, endeavoring to determine what it was best to do, for there in the utter darkness, with no handcuffs in his possession, with no cords to bind his captive when he should have secured him, and with no light or means of procuring a light to find such, it left him only one recourse in case he decided to make the attack, and that would be to choke or pound his victim into insensibility at once.

Nick Carter did not like to do that sort of thing, at least without being reasonably certain who it was he was choking.

He wondered why this sleeping man had not been awakened by the slight noise he had made in forcing the door, but remembering that he had not, it occurred to him that since the man was sleeping so soundly he might himself venture to search for matches and cord before he made the attack.

Crossing the room through the darkness to one of the side walls, he felt along it until he found a picture which he immediately pulled down from its place, and from which he quickly removed the wire cord that had supported it.

Then he returned to the bedside.

For the moment he had entirely forgotten the presence of Nita in the hallway, or it is likely he would have gone to warn her of what he was about to do, but now again bending over the prostrate figure on the bed, he seized it suddenly in his grasp, and rolled it over and over, winding the bedclothes about it as he did so, and at last rolled the man to the floor, where he fell upon him and held him down, so that, tangled in the bedclothes as he was, he could barely move.

Nevertheless, he struggled valiantly, and Nick was surprised at the strength he showed, but now so wrapped and swathed in the bedclothing was the man that Nick found it impossible to secure him with the cord that he had taken from the picture.

"Nita," he called out suddenly, at the risk of others hearing him, "come here, child, and help me, and if you know any means of procuring a light, for goodness' sake strike one!"

There was a swift rush toward him. He heard Nita entering the room, and the next instant she had scratched a match and was holding it down so that by the light of its flame they could both see the rather mummylike figure of the man swathed in the bedclothing.

She drew away instantly, it being evident that she only held the match where she did in order to assure herself that Nick Carter himself was not in trouble, and crossing to the bureau, she lighted a candle which was there and returned.

During this time the detective had retained his secure hold upon the man on the floor, sitting upon him the while and pressing the clothes firmly over his face and mouth, in order to prevent him from calling out for assistance.

Now, however, he made ready to release him preparatory to making use of the wire cord, and before he did so he leaned forward and said so that he knew that the man could hear him:

"I'm about to unwind you from this bedclothing, my friend, but I warn you now if you make a sound that can be heard ten feet away, you'll get hurt."

Partly straightening himself and making ready for the struggle that might ensue, he gave a quick twist to the quilts and covers and tore them away from his captive, disclosing not the sinister face of Brown Chet, but the handsome features of the now thoroughly frightened Diego Morales! and Morales was muttering in suppliant tones:

"The Mystery Man! The Mystery Man! Spare me, sir, for Heaven's sake, spare me!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE DESERTED RANCH-HOUSE.

It required only a very few minutes for the detective, with the aid of picture-cords taken from the walls, to bind Diego Morales so effectually that there was no hope for him to escape, and during this operation the Mexican thoroughly overcame his first terror, for he discovered that the man who had captured him was not the dreaded Mystery Man, after all, but none other than the detective, Nick Carter, who had lately been masquerading as a half-breed vaquero.

All of his cool self-assurance returned to him then, and the old sardonic smile appeared on his handsome face.

But Nick noticed while he was binding the man that he frequently cast baleful glances upon the girl, whom he seemed to recognize and who he now understood to have betrayed him, or otherwise she would not have been in the detective's company.

And presently, just about the time the work of binding the man was finished, Morales spoke to her:

"So!" he said in his soft Spanish, "it is you, Juanita, whom I have to thank for this! Let me assure you, señorita, that I will not forget it and that I will repay."

"You needn't be too sure of that," remarked Nick dryly. "It seems to me you've got a few other little accounts to square before you attempt anything of that kind; and now, Don Diego Morales, I will thank you to answer a few questions which I will ask you."

"I am but a poor subject at answering questions, Señor Carter," replied the Mexican impertinently and with a cool insolence that rather surprised the detective under the circumstances, "and it may be, señor, that I have more and better opportunities than you for doing whatsoever it pleases me to do."

"Where is your master?" demanded Nick bluntly.

"I have no master, señor; I am my own administrator," was the cool reply.

"Where is Brown Chet?"

"Alas, señor, I do not know!"

"How does it happen that you are occupying his room and bed?"

"That, señor, is as great a puzzle to me as it is to you."

"You are a very easy liar, Morales," said Nick grimly.

"I lie not so easy as I might wish, señor," he replied, putting another meaning to the words.

"People who can talk and won't talk should be made to talk; unless I am very much mistaken, we will find a way to loosen that tongue, and for once to burden it with the truth."

"I seem to be very much at your disposal, señor," was the cold response.

By way of reply the detective turned to the bed, secured one of the pillow-cases, and ripping it in half twisted one portion of it into a rope, which he thrust into the Mexican's mouth and tied tightly behind his head, thus effectually gagging him.

It had rather surprised the detective to discover that Morales, although unmistakably sleeping when he was found had yet gone to bed entirely clothed save for his boots and hat, and it had suggested to Nick that he had only been utilizing an interval of waiting to secure some sleep in preparation for some journey which was to follow; and while the detective lifted the man from the floor and flung him unceremoniously back upon the dismantled bed, he thought deeply upon this phase of the incident.

He could only surmise the answer, however, and that without any facts to go upon, save that it would be Brown Chet's play to get away from 7-Up Ranch as soon as possible after his cousin should be put to death, and to travel with all haste to New York City in order to pass himself off in the character of Godfrey Chester.

And the detective realized only too well that if Brown Chet should succeed in reaching the metropolis under such conditions after having disposed not only of the life, but also of the body of his cousin, it would be next to impossible for the detective to establish the falsity of his representations.

Without Chester himself, and, moreover, without Buck Hawkins to abet him and aid him in proving that Brown Chet was not Godfrey Chester, the villain could defy him; could laugh in his face and could carry out his purposes with a high hand.

And then he remembered the baleful glances that Morales had directed toward the girl when he discovered her presence in the room, and what he had said about wreaking vengeance upon her at some future time for her betrayal.

Now he turned toward Nita and said:

"It is time now, young lady, for you to tell me who you are, for it is quite evident to me that you are mixed up in this business more closely than you have admitted."

"I am," she acknowledged.

"Who, then, are you, child?"

"Mr. Carter," she replied, asking instead of answering a question, "you have been told, have you not, that one of these men was married and had a daughter?"

"Yes," he responded coldly, "but I also happen to know that the daughter is dead. She was murdered in New York City."

"One of the daughters," corrected Nita, "there were two; you have not been told of that."

"No," replied Nick, still speaking coldly, "I have not been told of that."

He thought for the moment that he scented in this insinuation of hers another plot, and although he was predisposed favorably toward this child-woman, this remark of hers renewed the suspicion of her motives that had occurred to him one before that night.

"Who are you?" he demanded abruptly and speaking severely. "Is it time that I know the answer to that question."

"I am Juanita Chester," she replied firmly. "My mother's name was Vernon Harcourt* before she married Godfrey Chester; when I was born a sister was born with me at the same time; that sister was given my mother's maiden name, while I was christened 'Juanita.'

"Shall I go on?"

"Yes," said Nick. "Tell me all as quickly as possible."

"We grew up to girlhood in a village in the East. We never knew our father's name until long after the death of our mother, and we were always known as the 'Harcourt sisters.'

"There never was a strong resemblance between us, as is apt to be the case where there are twins, although if you saw my sister and will study my face closely I think you will discover a family resemblance."

"I never saw Vernon Harcourt alive; I saw only her dead body," said Nick.

"After my mother's death," continued Nita, "we found letters and papers, a diary and other documents among her effects which were intended to inform us who we were and to clear up the mystery attending our birth and parentage. But the statements, unwittingly and unintentionally made ambiguous by my mother's haste in preparing them, left us in doubt as to which of the cousins she referred to had been her husband and was therefore our father. She confused the names of Godfrey Chester and Chester Godfrey so many times that it was impossible for us to determine, and it is only since I have been masquerading as a Mexican girl here at this ranch, passing myself off as the daughter of one of the vaqueros who is really a devoted servant to me, that I have been able to ascertain the truth; and I have discovered it, Mr. Carter, by listening to conversations between this man here and the man whom you call 'Brown Chet.'"

"Go on," said Nick. "Tell me more."

"I have heard them talk together frequently, and I have never omitted an opportunity of listening to them when it was possible to do so."

Nick nodded.

"I have heard the man, Brown Chet, discuss every one of his villainies and his crimes with this comrade of his, who is now bound and helpless on the bed. I have heard him refer to my sister and to me often, for strangely enough he was more familiar with our history—at least, so I have heard him state in those conversations—than my own father was; more familiar with things that concerned us because all his life he has plotted and planned against Godfrey Chester, my father, and therefore against my sister and myself.

"Now, sir, with one more statement I will have finished my story.

"When Vernon and I learned who we were, we started out to discover our identities beyond question. There was no thought whatever concerning the fortune our father had owned, for of a truth we knew nothing about it, but we were romantic enough to believe that if we found him, proved to him who we were, and let him see for himself how eager we were for his love and care, he would claim us.

"I came with my sister to this ranch more than four years ago; it was deserted and both the cousins had disappeared. We found that one of them, he who was called Godfrey Chester, had gone to Alaska, and we followed him there. Bit by bit we secured as much evidence as we could concerning which my sister Vernon once wrote you a letter, and she stated in that letter—I refer to it in order to assure you that I am familiar with its contents—that she would call upon you at your house that same evening at eight o'clock."

"That is quite true," admitted the detective.

"At the time that letter was written and sent to you, it was deemed best between us not to mention the fact that there were two of us and that same day, within an hour after the letter was written and before it could have been delivered to you, I started westward again for this ranch, for I still believed I could find further proofs which I thought I needed here.

"I was here, Mr. Carter, when you visited this place before, but I had already learned from a newspaper brought to me from St. John by my servant, who is supposed here to be my Mexican father, of the tragic death of my sister Vernon.

"That is all, and I think that you believe I have spoken the truth, do you not?"

"Yes," said Nick, "I do."

"So now," she said, taking a step nearer to him and looking up into his eyes pleadingly, "I know that Godfrey Chester is my father. I know that, together with your friend Buck Hawkins, he has again fallen into the evil power of Brown Chet, and in liberating you from that

*The reader is referred to pp. 5 and 22 of the NEW CARTER WEEKLY for the previous history of Godfrey Chester and Vernon Harcourt.

aside prison as I did, I believe now that not only was I assisting you, but that I was taking the very best course I could adopt to save my father's life."

It will be remembered that Nick Carter had been stripped of all he possessed save the clothes he wore, so now, instead of replying to Nita in words, he nodded his head emphatically, and stepping across the room to a table where Morales had placed his cartridge-belt and pistols, he strapped them around him in preparation for what he had to do.

"Now, Nita," he said to her then, "I'll take the lead, and you are to follow. Do you happen to know that there is a secret way out of this room?"

"I have heard of it, but I don't know about it."

Nick pulled aside the curtain that concealed the secret door and opened it. Then he stepped back into the room, raised the helpless Morales in his arms as if he was a child, and added:

"When I pass down the stairs with this imp of darkness, extinguish the light and follow me, closing the door after you."

She did as she was directed, and presently they were moving swiftly across the level space which separated the ranch-house from the butte where the cavern of the Mystery Man was located, and the detective did not pause in his rapid walk until they were again there and he had deposited his burden safely on the earthen floor.

"Now, Nita," he said, with stern emphasis, for he was giving her directions which he wished her to obey, "you have a pistol, I see; I want you to remain here on guard over this fellow until I return. It is best that you should have a light, for it cannot be seen from the outside. The Mexican is bound so that there is no possibility, I think, of his escaping; but all the same you must not permit yourself to drop asleep, and you must not cease to watch him narrowly while I am away. Will you obey me?"

"I will," she responded.

"I am going back to the ranch-house now in search of your father and Buck Hawkins, and if they are there I will find them, but it might be well, Nita, if before I go you will tell me the name of this servant of yours in whom you have such confidence, for it is possible I may find him somewhere and induce him to assist me."

"Alas!" she replied. "He has gone to St. John with a message for you from me, for I had no idea you would return. He has not come back, and I don't know where he is."

"All right," said Nick. "Wait here for me."

"Suppose that something should happen to you so that you cannot return?" she said, coming toward him and resting one hand on his arm.

"In that case," he replied, "you must make your way to St. John as best you can and from there back to New York; but give yourself no uneasiness, for I shall return."

He turned away abruptly and left the cave of the Mystery Man and hastened swiftly back to the ranch-house.

He entered it by the secret entrance which connected with Brown Chet's private room, and was still rather nonplused because there were no signs of life about the place. The quarters of the cowboys being located in buildings far removed from the ranch-house itself and very near to the corral.

And now he began a systematic search of the house, for he was armed and well prepared for whatever he might encounter; and he believed that somewhere about the place he would find, if not the men he was seeking, at least some indication of what had become of them or where they had been taken.

He went from room to room on that floor, never passing a door without opening it, but discovering nothing save deserted apartments.

He was amazed to find that even the quarters he knew had been given up to the occupancy of servants were deserted, and at last he stood alone in the big dining-room where once he had struggled with Brown Chet, and he was assured in his own mind that Diego Morales had been the only person in that house when he entered it in company with Juanita.

He estimated that there were still two or three hours of darkness and realized how fruitless it was for him to make any further search of the premises until he had daylight to aid him; and with daylight he knew would come the awakening of the men who were employed there, who now would not hesitate to shoot him on sight, and against whom it would be impossible for him to compete single-handed.

Assured that he was alone in the house, confident that there was no immediate danger of interruption, and believing that he would be able to hear the approach of a person if one should come toward the house, he lighted the lamp which hung from the ceiling over the table, and seated himself to rest and to wait for daylight.

The unpleasant experiences through which he had passed prior to his rescue by Juanita, the drugging he had undergone, the effects of which had not entirely left him, and the stiffness of his muscles and sinews resulting from the long period of inactivity while he was lying bound and gagged on the earthen floor of the ad be hut, all had their effect upon him, so that now when he dropped into the chair beside the table, resting his elbow upon it, he discovered that he was thoroughly weary.

After a few moments, despite his efforts to keep awake, he drowsed, and with his head leaning upon his hand, presently slept.

It was an incautious thing for Nick Carter to permit himself to do, and it was not at all like him.

Nevertheless, the condition existed, and he slept on quietly, without moving for upward of half an hour.

And so it was that he did not hear the patter of horses' feet approaching the house; he did not hear the softly spoken word of command as the horses were stopped in front of the door; he did not hear the softly turned latch and the cautious footfalls of men as they advanced along the hallway toward the room wherein he was sleeping; he did not even hear the cautious opening of the door of the room where he was nor observe the entrance of a man who halted suddenly ere he was well across the threshold, amazed and staring by the spectacle of Nick Carter seated there quietly sleeping.

But at that instant something aroused the detective to thorough wakefulness.

He opened his eyes, stared for the briefest instant, saw the man in the doorway and the shadowy figures of three other men behind him, and leaped to his feet, instantly energized with all the vitality he possessed; and with the same motion of springing upward from his chair he swung a second chair—upon the arm of which his right hand had been resting—he swung it into the air with a lightning-like motion, crashing it against the hanging lamp above the table, utterly demolishing it and plunging the room instantly into absolute darkness.

CHAPTER XII.

TAKING A DESPERATE CHANCE.

The instant the detective swung the chair against the lamp, smashing it and extinguishing the light and plunging the room into darkness, he also dropped to the floor as if he had been shot, and it was well that he did so, for bullets instantly whizzed through the space that his body had occupied a second before.

The instant he touched the floor he rolled himself beneath the table, and he kept on rolling until he came out at the opposite, and there he leaped quickly and silently to his feet, and with a few hasty strides crossed the room, not away from, but toward, the men who had attacked him, in order that if possible he might get behind them, as he certainly would do if they rushed into the room en masse.

But this they did not do.

Instead, they remained grouped near the doorway, firing their revolvers indiscriminately into the room, and it is certain that the flashes from their weapons would have discovered the detective to them, had not the charges already fired so filled the room with smoke that it would have been impossible to see across it distinctly even had the lamp been burning.

While Nick waited, crouching against the wall to the right of where the men were standing, the firing ceased and Nick heard the voice of Brown Chet inquire in Spanish:

"Did we get him? Did we hit him?"

"*Quien sabe?*" replied another voice, evidently that of the man who had first entered the room. "I saw him fall, and I think, señor, that he is dead."

"Strike a light, then," commanded Brown Chet.

"*Si, señor,*" was the instant reply; but Nick Carter had no intention of permitting a light to be struck at just that moment, and concluding to a nicety by the sound of the voices just where the men were standing, he stepped swiftly forward and struck out with his fists violently.

Though aimed in the dark, the blow went true, and uttering a loud cry, the half-breed was hurled backward bodily against his companions by the force of it, and instantly there was again confusion in the room.

And now realizing that he was in a trap from which it would be impossible to escape unscathed if once these men succeeded in obtaining a light, Nick Carter rushed forward a second time and so propelled himself bodily against the men who crowded the doorway, shoving them one against the other until they all staggered back into the hall, one or more of them falling and all of them struggling together in the utmost confusion, for in their

the dense darkness it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe.

And so he succeeded in getting past them without their knowing it, but as he ran toward the front door, to make his way outside, it was thrown violently open, lights flashed, and at least a dozen men attempted to crowd through the doorway at the same time.

There was nothing to do but have recourse to the stairs which were near at hand, and Nick turned and dashed up them, pursued by a fusillade of bullets, which fortunately, in the confusion and the uncertain light, plunged harmlessly into the walls instead of hitting him.

As he turned around the top of the stairs on the second floor, he heard the voice of Brown Chet yelling a command to his followers:

"It's that devil of a detective!" he called. "Capture him! Don't let him escape! A thousand dollars in gold to the man who takes him! Two thousand dollars in gold to the man who kills him!"

If the outlaws—and they were no better than that—needed any additional incentive to perform the work they were ordered to do, the mention of the word gold provided it; for gold has a magic sound to the Mexican, who is accustomed to rating his money by the silver standard.

They rushed up the stairway after the detective, but already he had passed through a doorway into a room which he recollected—by reason of his recent search of the premises—being particularly well adapted to his present needs; and he closed the door after him and barred it securely, for not only was he assured in his own mind that his enemies would be obliged to secure some sort of battering-ram before they could demolish it, but also that he could escape from it through a window and cross the roof of a lower section of the house.

But now as he rushed toward this window and threw it open, he discovered to his dismay that there were iron bars across it, a fact which he had not noticed when he was there before.

He seized upon one after another of the bars and shook them violently, but only to find that they were firmly embedded in their places and that there was but little hope of his being able to remove them without a bar of some kind with which to pry them apart.

And then came a stormy clamor at the door as his pursuers pounded upon it and strove vainly enough, it is true, by forcing their bodies against it to force it from its hinges.

It was a stout door, however, and resisted every shock that was propelled against it from the outside.

Nick, after waiting a moment and listening to the noise, smiled grimly, and then from one of the pistols that had formerly belonged to Morales he sent, one after another, three bullets through it, but it was impossible to determine whether he had hit any of the men outside the room or if, indeed, the bullets had penetrated the heavy door, but the noise of attack upon it ceased, and for a time there was silence.

The heavy clouds already referred to which had made the night so intensely dark outside had now dispersed in part, and there was enough light that penetrated to the room past the iron bars to enable Nick to see about him, although with indistinctness.

The situation was not at all to his liking.

It had never been Nick Carter's method to fly from anybody or to run from his enemies, no matter how many of them there might be, but under the present circumstances, or rather the circumstances that had just passed, it would have been foolhardy indeed had he attempted to pass them and fight them, for he would have gone down before their numbers, no matter how valiantly he might have fought.

He recalled now the condition in which he had discovered Morales fully clothed, though sleeping and apparently awaiting the moment of departure from the ranch, and therefore the return of those men who had appeared so suddenly.

And now like a flash it all came to him what these strange proceedings on the part of Brown Chet and Diego Morales and their followers portended.

He uttered his thoughts aloud as they came to him, the better to keep them consecutively, and this is what he told himself:

"Brown Chet has of course determined to put Buck Hawkins and myself to death, as well as his cousin, Godfrey Chester, but even in this far-away corner of civilization murders are not committed with impunity in this day and age, at least without bringing inquiry into the cause of them; and therefore Brown Chet, with his usual ability as a plotter, has probably hit upon a scheme whereby he can dispose of us in such a way as to head off all questions that might be asked afterward.

"Cattle-rustlers and horse-thieves are lynched in this country without very much opposition and with little danger of legal inquiry into the cases afterward, and in order to protect himself from the consequences of these murders he contemplated I haven't a doubt in my mind now that Brown Chet and his men have ridden in various directions from here to other ranches in order to notify their owners and outfits that he has captured three horse-thieves whom he intends to hang at daylight. I think that must be about the size of it.

"And if I am correct, Brown Chet has now returned with one or more delegations from other ranches to carry out that idea; and representing himself as Godfrey Chester he has probably represented that the Brown Chet who has been living here has been all the time a horse-thief and cattle-rustler and a maverick man.

"Again, if I am correct, I must conclude that somewhere about these premises, possibly in the corral or in another adobe hut such as I was confined in, Godfrey Chester and Buck Hawkins are alive, waiting only the hangman's rope to put them to death.

"The apparent utter desertion of the ranch-house when I entered it, with only Morales left to guard it and he asleep with his clothes on; the absence of signs of life about the bunk-houses and corral where the men would be sleeping or gambling and where some of them certainly should have been moving about; the unoccupied servants' quarters within this house all go to support this theory, to say nothing of the fact that it would be the only way by which Brown Chet could adequately and consistently account for the three deaths that are necessary to the success of his plans.

And here I am practically a prisoner in this room, surrounded by a horde of men outside, many of them honest in their intentions, certainly those who have been brought here from other ranches and those men led to believe that I am one of the horse-thieves who has succeeded in escaping my temporary prison during their absence. It surely is a nice predicament for me to find myself in."

He crossed over to the door and listened, for in that instant he determined that if the men had withdrawn he would throw it open and dash out, taking his chances of getting past them in his efforts to obtain his liberty.

But he could hear the murmur of low voices beyond the door, and he knew it was guarded.

He did not doubt that they were planning some new deviltry, and he wondered what it was, never guessing that at that very moment Brown Chet's men were engaged in silently piling all the inflammable material they could gather against that other door.

But presently he was apprised of it, for the smell of oil-soaked material that was burning penetrated to the room, and Nick Carter knew that his enemies were engaged in smoking him out, hoping thus to force him to unbar his door and make a dash for liberty; it would be an easy matter to shoot him down relentlessly or to recapture him for the future hanging in such a case.

And now, in support of the theory he had formed, the men beyond the door shouted out to him:

"Come out of that, you horse-thief, if you don't want to be burned alive! Unbar the door and come out of there!"

The detective did not reply. Instead he turned about for a second examination of the window, protected as it was by the iron bars.

But even as he turned away from the door, a method of escape from the room which was so simple that it was strange he had not thought of it before occurred to him, and he smiled at the very simplicity of it.

There was the stout oaken bar, almost as heavy and strong as iron itself, with which the door was fastened; with that in his grasp it would be a simple matter to pry the iron bars loose from the window and so to make his escape.

The only difficulty about such a proceeding which suggested itself to him was the danger that during the interval while he was using the oaken bar, the door beyond which the men were waiting and against which the fire was now raging would be unfastened, and if the men but knew it or guessed it, it would be a simple matter for them to rush into the room before he could hope to have time enough to break his way to freedom; but there was the fire now raging fiercely, as he knew, to lessen such a probability. Without doubt, the men outside would believe that he could not long withstand the horrors suggested by the danger of burning to death, and that presently he would unbar the door and rush out upon them.

Again he approached the door, and this time he leaned his body firmly against it, in order to loosen the bar in the brackets that held it, and thus enable him to lift it from its place without noise; and in a moment more he had succeeded in removing it, had crossed swiftly to the window, and with, precisely as little time as it takes to tell

it had pried the iron bars aside, thus creating space enough for him to crowd his body between them.

We need not dwell further upon his escape from the room, for it was a matter of a moment only for him to leap to the roof outside, to crouch and to run swiftly across it to its uttermost extremity, and thence to jump to the ground below.

He paused an instant there, and he could hear the murmur of men's voices as they conversed together around in front of the house, and dimly through the increasing light he saw several of them at that moment come around a distant corner and approach the locality of the window behind which only a few moments before he had been a prisoner. It was plain that he had made his escape only just in time, for had he waited a little longer he would have been seen when he climbed through the bars and would have been relentlessly shot to death. But now he was free.

He remembered his theory that his two friends were confined either in the corral or in a hut not unlike the one from which Nita had rescued him; and he realized that there was no person better calculated to act as guide for him in discovering such a place than Nita herself.

But he determined first to make sure of the corral and started for it on a run.

The great gate in the stockade was closed, but it was fastened from the outside, and he dropped the bar, casting it from him, and, pushing the heavy gates wide ajar, passed through.

He remembered from his former visit that there was a roof over the walled-in section at one corner of the corral, and, believing that this would be the most likely place where his friends might be, he ran toward it in all haste.

He was conscious as he did so that the animals within the enclosure had quickly discovered the gates were open, and were already slowly filing through it to liberty, for they knew perfectly well that beyond it was mile upon mile of sweet grass which they could nibble, and cool earth upon which they could roll.

There was black darkness within the hut referred to, but he called through the narrow opening:

"Chester! Buck! Are you there?"

Two groans uttered in unison replied to him, and leaping forward through the darkness, he lost no time in drawing the gags from their mouths and removing the cords from their wrists and ankles; and then, while they stretched themselves and sought by every means to restore the circulation of their blood, Nick remembered that horses would be very necessary to their escape and also that unless he acted at once there would not be an animal left in the corral for them to use.

He knew that this little house in the corner of the corral had been created specially for the storage of extra ropes, hobbles, saddles, and like impedimenta, and realizing that he must act quickly, he exclaimed:

"Buck, listen to me! I must hurry and close the gate of the corral or there will not be a horse left for us to use. Over in the cavern of the Mystery Man that little Juanita whom you know is waiting for me. There are ropes and saddles in this hut. I will hurry to the gates and close them, and then I will go on after Juanita, and you had better wait here; in the meantime, stiff and lame as you are, you and Chester must somehow manage to capture four horses. If there are not saddles enough here to go around, use what there are, but be ready for us by the time we return.

Without awaiting an answer he darted swiftly away, and presently closed the corral gates, satisfied that barely more than half of the horses had already escaped, and then he pushed onward across the plain as swiftly as he could run toward the cavern.

CHAPTER XIII.

BROWN CHET'S LAST EFFORT.

The detective found Juanita exactly as he had left her, seated with her back against the wall of the cavern, with her face toward Diego Morales, and with a pistol in her lap ready for instant use.

"Come," he said to her. "I want you," and as she leaped to her feet he seized her by one hand, pulled her quickly out of the cavern, and started again upon a run toward the corral.

"What has happened?" she gasped, as they sped onward.

"Never mind now," he replied. "You will know later."

"But what of Morales?"

"We'll leave him where he is—to die, unless one of his friends finds him."

She ran like a deer beside him, and presently they passed safely through the gate into the corral to discover that awaiting them just beyond it were Buck Hawkins and Chester, holding the four horses which Nick had

directed them to secure, and that they were saddled and bridled and ready for instant use.

It was the work of an instant only for them to mount, and then the detective gave them one hasty order:

"Follow me and keep together," he commanded, and rode quickly through the gate.

As they passed through it the ranch-house burst into flame, seemingly from every part of it at once, so that the whole area around it and them was instantly brilliantly illumined, and they could see almost two score of men hurrying excitedly to and fro in the vivid light.

But if the sudden accession of light revealed to them the horde of men who were seeking their lives, it also revealed Nick Carter and his friends to the incendiaries.

Instantly there went up a loud shout from them, and many of them dashed toward the corral in their eagerness to secure the escaping prisoners.

Nick knew now that escape was comparatively an easy matter, for all of these man who were running toward them were on foot, save two, and one of those Nick discovered instantly was Brown Chet himself, while the other—and he uttered an exclamation of pleasure when he made the discovery—was no less a person than the sheriff of the county, who was well known to Nick Carter and who had once visited him at his home.

Therefore, instead of riding away from the apparent danger, Nick Carter started his horse directly toward it, shouting to his friends to wait for him as he did so.

Chester and Juanita sat their horses where they were, but Buck Hawkins rode forward beside the detective, unslinging the lariat that was coiled about the pommel of his saddle as he did so.

Brown Chet saw them coming; he also heard Nick Carter call out the sheriff's name in these words:

"Hello, Bob Ginger, old friend! Hold your fire! I am Nick Carter, and these people are my friends! The horse-thieves you seek are back there in the crowd, and the chief of them all is beside you now!"

In the vivid light of the fire Brown Chet saw who was with the detective, and saw Chester beyond him and realized that his game was up. He collected his forces now, and suddenly stopped and raised his pistol, with the evident intention of taking one last shot at Nick, but ere he could pull the trigger Buck Hawkins' rope coiled like a serpent through the air. The loop settled over Brown Chet's shoulders, pinioning his arms to his sides; and with that instant he was dragged from his saddle to the ground and then along it at a fearful pace, rolling over and over, striking upon head and shoulders, and face and body, and yelling with anguish and terror.

And then it was that Nick Carter fired the only shot he discharged throughout all these exciting scenes; it was a snap shot and a perfect one, for the bullet cut Hawkins' lariat like a knife, thus saving Brown Chet from further dragging.

He was dead, however, when they got to him a moment later, for the fall from the horse when he was about to shoot Nick Carter had fractured his skull.

In the meantime the sheriff had turned about to face the other men who were rushing toward them, and raising both hands to command silence and to stop them, which he knew he could do since he was sheriff of the county, he sat like a statue on his horse while he explained to them who and what Nick Carter really was.

We have nothing to do with the future achievements of the sheriff in punishing the men who had been associated with Brown Chet in his deviltries; suffice it to say that those who deserved punishment received it, and that the once formidable outfit of 7-Up Ranch was scattered to all parts of the country; and somewhere among them Diego Morales wandered also, for when later Nick visited the cavern in search of him, he was gone, and only the severed bonds, cut with a knife, remained to tell of his late presence there.

It is necessary that we should add that Juanita Chester succeeded definitely in establishing her identity with her father, and notwithstanding his one-time assertion to Nick Carter that he was glad his daughter was dead—it had been made when he supposed there was only one daughter—he seemed overjoyed to have this one restored to him. Not long after that he took her to Alaska and the Klondike with him, traced out every incident of his career there, established thoroughly and forever his identity as Godfrey Chester, the mine-owner, and then having returned to New York with his daughter, he secured possession of the palatial mansion on the avenue, which by rights belonged to him, and there he is passing the remainder of his days.

THE END.

The next number, 556, will contain complete, besides the usual departments, "A Bad Man from Montana; or, Nick Carter's Chase of an Outlaw."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

A traveler, who has noticed the strange things in the countries he visits, has this to say:

How different the fishing in the waters of the United States and in those of South America. I have engaged in both, and been struck forcibly with the distinctions.

You who quietly let down the seine in northern streams, have only the simple labor of hauling it on shore. At most, nothing more than an obstruction upon the bottom, such as a post, stump, or stone, annoys you, while just observe what we South Americans have to contend with. And when I tell my readers that there is no stream in which we ever fish that is not literally overflowing with alligators or caymen, they will appreciate at once a few of our difficulties.

Despite these vicious enemies, and the immense depth of the water, the fishermen accomplish their work with surprising success—especially the swimmers, who follow the net, do their work with as much skill as the pearl-divers of the East.

On one occasion we were engaged in fishing with our nets in the Orinoco.

We were progressing finely, when we were all brought to a standstill by some obstruction. A furious struggling and dragging at the seine proved unmistakably that we had enveloped an alligator, and that he was as anxious to get out of the entanglement as we were to have him do so.

There was but one way of getting out of the dilemma, and that was by taking the offensive and ridding ourselves of the monster, and, in doing this, one of the fishermen performed what I have no hesitation in calling a remarkable feat. He lashed the cayman under the water.

The moment it was evident that we had such an obstruction, one of the fishermen called for a lariat, and, swimming aside the net with it in his hands, dove beneath the surface. A few moments of anxious suspense followed, and he came to the surface panting and unharmed without having accomplished anything. He stated that he had not been able to ascertain the precise position of their enemy. Keeping his head above water until fairly enough to inhale a fresh breath, he dove again. This time we watched with almost painful interest his reappearance. When he came up he announced that he had succeeded, in proof of which he handed us the other end of the rope that we might draw him forth.

This was emphatically the "tug of war," for these reptiles, from their peculiar formation, are endowed with immense powers while in the water. It required the united efforts of the eight men upon shore to drag him to land.

When within a few feet his resistance became so furious that it seemed impossible to budge him an inch. On the contrary, so great was his power, that all those men who had their backs to the water, the rope over their shoulders, pulling with all their united strength, were drawn several feet backward in spite of their utmost efforts.

Finding that a dead pull was not sufficient, they resorted to an unfair means. Yielding to the cayman more than all the rope he wished, that is until the hindmost stood in the very edge of the water, they made a start and rush altogether up the bank. This *coup d'état* accomplished what they wished.

The alligator was drawn up the bank, far away from the water. Here his struggles were so desperate that he kept every one at a distance; but when he became exhausted, one of the fishermen cautiously approached him, and drove a lance with such force and suddenness beneath the armpit, as to cause his death in a few moments.

A second time the nets were cast, and in almost precisely the same spot. The net was again caught, and held us still. This time, however, it was evidently caught by a snag, and another fisherman dove to free it.

We patiently awaited his reappearance; but when minute after minute passed, we became filled with apprehension, which soon resolved itself into a certainty, that some unusual accident had occurred.

Other and more skilful swimmers now dove beneath the surface, and made diligent search for their missing companion. They kept it up for twenty minutes, but not a trace of him was discovered either then or afterward. These ignorant fishermen attributed his death to the supernatural influence of some evil genii of the deep, never once suspecting that it might have been a crocodile, which is more dangerous than its companion, the alligator. As for myself, I have no doubt that his death was owing to one of these dreaded reptiles.

"I have it in my mind to be a detective, and wish very much to be one, but my parents are opposed to it. Would you please be kind enough to tell me how or in what way I could get to be one, and I would be very thankful to you. CHARLIE."

Philadelphia, Pa.

It is always a good plan for a boy to follow his parents' advice. If your parents think that you ought not to be a detective that alone is good reason why you should abandon any idea of following that occupation.

There are crimes being perpetrated every day in Philadelphia, and if you can ferret out one of these then you will place yourself in the line of accomplishing your desires. As a means of aiding you we would suggest that you devote your leisure to amateur detective work. You can begin by being a private watchman, and when you have succeeded in that, join the police force. If you show marked detective ability you will have no difficulty in having yourself transferred to the detective force. While you are waiting to reach the proper age, height, and size to be able to protect yourself it would be well for you to learn a trade, so that you will have an occupation to fall back on if you are not a success as a sleuth-hound.

The so-called "snake stones" of Ceylon are celebrated for the efficacy which they are supposed to have in sucking the bites of venomous serpents. Recently a controversy as to the method of

their manufacture, which is a lucrative business carried on by monks, who supply the merchants of India with them. Very [illegible] They are employed in the [illegible] manner of those placed on the animal, their absorbent material sucking up the blood and incidentally the venom, as is claimed. There is plenty of authentic evidence of remarkable cures performed by such snake stones, though science is as yet reluctant to place any belief in them.

One writer tells of an occasion when he was riding along a jungle path on the island, and he saw one or two natives who were approaching suddenly dart off from the road and return immediately with a cobra, the most deadly of all serpents, grasped by the head and tail. The man tried to place the snake in a covered basket, but handled it so inexpertly that it seized him by the finger and retained its hold for a few seconds. Blood flowed and intense pain appeared to follow. As quickly as possible the other native undid his own waist cloth and took from it two snake stones, each the size of a small almond, intensely black and highly polished, though extremely light. These he applied one to each wound inflicted by the teeth of the cobra. They attached themselves closely, the blood that oozed from the bite being rapidly imbibed by the porous substance. After three or four minutes they dropped off and the suffering of the man seemed to have subsided. He twisted his fingers until the joints cracked, and went on his way without concern. It has been ascertained with certainty that these snake stones are usually nothing more than pieces of burned bone. The Mexican recipe for making a snake stone is to take a fragment of deer's horn of any convenient size and shape, cover it with grass, inclose both in a thin piece of sheet copper, and place the parcel in a charcoal fire until the bone is well charred. When cold remove the calcined horn from its envelope, when it will be found to be a solid black fibrous substance. It will then be ready for immediate use.

A comparison of the different methods of doing what is practically the same thing in various parts of the world is both interesting and amusing to the thoughtful observer. On American ferry-boats the import is well known of the "ting-ting" or "jingle-jingle" of the bell by which the man in the wheel-house communicates with his fellow mortal in the engine-room. On the Thames, in England, however, it would be considered practically impossible to convey information in this manner, and the captains of small [illegible] rely on the [illegible] and [illegible] using out "ease 'er," "back 'er," etc., apparently to nobody in particular, while these interesting remarks are promptly repeated, in shrill tones, by a small boy into a speaking-tube, which communicates with the lower regions. On the Seine, in France, this process is simplified, and a large trumpet-shaped mouthpiece flares out in front of the man at the wheel, and he yells his commands into this funnel, the other end of which is supposed to reach the engineer. The large steamers on the Rhine, in Germany, are controlled, not by the usual wheel placed in a wheel-house forward, but by a very large wheel on a vertical axis, placed right amidships upon an elevated platform or bridge, and several men push the handles from right to left, or upon occasion trot round in a circle, and it would, doubtless, be considered a serious temptation of Providence, or, at least, a reflection upon the Fatherland, if any one were to attempt to construct a Rhine steamer with the [illegible]

Old shoes are not waste from the standpoint of modern industry. After they have done their service and are discarded [illegible] are [illegible] and [illegible] and [illegible] are [illegible] and [illegible] are finally destroyed by fire, they are still good for various purposes. In France such shoes are bought up in quantities by rag-dealers and sold to factories, where the shoes are taken apart and submitted to [illegible] which [illegible] them into a paste, from which the material is [illegible] or imitation leather, appearing very much like the finest morocco. Upon this material stylish designs are stamped, and wall-papers, trunk coverings, and similar articles are manufactured from it.

Another French industry using old dilapidated shoes is the transforming of old into new footwear. This is the principal occupation of the military convicts imprisoned in the fortress of Montpellier. There the shoes are taken apart, all the nails are taken out, and then the leather is soaked into water some time to soften it. From those pieces that can be used are cut the uppers for children's shoes, and parts of the soles are similarly used. The smallest pieces of leather are applied to the used in high Louis XV. heels, which were so much in style a few years ago. Even the nails of the old shoes are used again. They are separated by a magnet, which attracts the steel nails, while the copper and brass nails are carried on farther. The price received for the old copper nails alone almost pays for the first cost of the old shoes. Clippings and cuttings of the leather are also used, being turned into a paste from which artificial leather is made, and what is not good enough to serve for this purpose is sold with the sweepings to agriculturists in the neighborhood, who use this paste with great success as a fertilizer.

"Talk about the elaborate precautions taken by burglars," said a well-known New York police commissioner lately. "I had in my possession a short time ago a note-book belonging to a notorious and expert burglar, and I can assure you the harmless-looking thing—it was an ordinary cheap laundry-book—was quite a revelation to me, experienced as I was.

"On the first page was a well-drawn plan of a gentleman's house in Yonkers, and on the page facing were exhaustive notes in cipher of the locks and window-fastenings, the hour at which the household retired for the night, which rooms they occupied, and many similar facts that must have been exceedingly difficult to collect. On three other pages there were plans of three other houses with notes carefully compiled, and in one case large pieces of furniture, such as sideboards, tables, and pianos were indicated, representing their exact positions in the house to which the plan referred.

"At the end of the book there were notes of the tools that would be required by the burglar to manage each job, and mentioning the best time, and how the night police officers worked those particular beats.

"Now, all these plans and facts must have taken months to collect, besides involving the risk of exciting suspicion, and perhaps getting locked up. In the case where the furniture was marked in the plans, the burglar must have got into the house on some pretence or other, for he could not have secured such details out of the servants.

"No; all his trouble and patience were wasted, since he was arrested for another job before he could work any of those mentioned in his note-book, which was, by-the-way, found upon him at the time of his capture."

"The most interesting thing I remember in a long life spent in mining," said an old miner who was at the Bendigo Diggings in the fifties, "is the story of the finding of the Napier Nugget, probably the largest and purest mass of gold ever found in the history of gold-mining.

"Napier was second mate on a boat plying between Melbourne and Liverpool, when the gold fever got into his blood, and he left the sea for the diggings in '57. He came to Bendigo, but met with no success, and then staked a claim at Kingower, on the Loddon River.

"He worked hard at Kingower, in company with his brother and a man called Ambrose, but for six months they scarcely saw the color of gold. When luck did come, it came in a way calculated to turn the brain of an ordinary man.

"One day, August 14 it was, the three men were just on the point of leaving their work at the bottom of a fourteen-foot claim, when Sam Napier, in putting down his pick, struck something hard. He turned it over, more in idle curiosity than anything else, and the light fell on a huge mass of what appeared to be virgin gold, almost heavier than he, strong man as he was, could lift. The three men saw at a glance that their fortunes were made, and were frantic with delight. However, they covered up their treasure with earth, and returned to their tent as if nothing had happened.

"In the dead of night they went back to their claim, carried off the nugget, and, for safety, buried it six feet deep under the table in the center of their tent.

For three months they had their meals over these buried thousands, and never breathed a word to a living soul. When their claim was exhausted, about the middle of November, they hired a horse and cart, dug up their nugget and placed it, together with their dust, in a box among a lot of old clothes, and started on a four-days' tramp to Melbourne.

"Here they consigned it through the Bank of Victoria to England, paying something like two hundred and twenty pounds export duty and ninety pounds for insurance.

"When London was reached the fame of this wonderful nugget had somehow preceded them, and the men and their lump of gold were a seven days' wonder. All the fashionable world crowded to see it, and even the queen was not happy until she had seen this marvelous nugget and the men who had found it.

"It was sold to the Bank of England for ten thousand pounds, and it turned the scale at thirty-four pounds over a hundredweight, its exact weight being one hundred and forty-six pounds, four ounces, and three pennyweights. It was within an eighth of a carat of being absolutely pure gold. For some time it was exhibited at the British Museum, and a cast of it was taken for preservation at the museum.

"And yet this wonderful discovery seemed to bring nothing but misfortune to its finders. Sam Napier married, went to Liverpool, and quickly lost all his money there. He returned to the diggings; but, though he spent years in hunting for more gold, he never found any."

CAUGHT.

BY WILLIAM DIXON.

One dark night in December, a man was walking hurriedly in the direction of the great woods, near Columbus. He wore a long ulster, such as are generally worn by commercial travelers, doubtless for the purpose of disguising himself; if so, it was very effectual.

As he neared the wood, he glanced anxiously through the darkness, as if in expectation of seeing somebody. When about to enter, he heard some one call, in a low voice:

"Hist!"

Entering the woods, he at once proceeded in the direction of the sound, where he encountered a man who seemed to be in waiting. It was none other than Dick Mason, a notorious burglar.

"So you've come at last," said Dick, as he approached, "after keeping me here for over an hour. I had about given you up."

"Better save your breath, Dick; you may need it all to-night; and just wait till I've had my say," said the last comer.

"Well, let's hear what you've got to say."

"Never mind that now; let us go to the dead oak, where we won't be overheard."

They at once proceeded farther into the dense wood. Stopping before a large oak-tree, the man in the long overcoat—who was called by his mate in crime Tall Ted—touched a secret spring in the side of the tree, causing a door, made of bark, to open. The tree was hollow. Both men entered, closing the door behind them. This was the entrance to the burglar's den.

Dick Mason then told him to proceed with what he had to say.

"You know," began Ted, "that to reach here from town, by any kind of a road, I had to pass the White Bull Inn. Well, just as I had got by it, and was thinking of making a short cut across Tim Murphy's farm, who should I see within ten yards ahead of me but Ben Harms, the New York detective. Thinks I, 'Ben is not there for nothing. I'll bet he's after tricking me.' To make a long story short, he was there for nothing else; so I had to give him the slip, which I did after fooling him for over an hour. Then I came here as fast as I could without causing suspicion. Now, Dick, get out the tools, and let us get on our way to that crib we are to crack to-night, for we've lost time enough already."

"But before we start," said Dick, "let me know how we're to work this job to-night."

"That's easy enough," answered Ted. "Carriman's house, as you know, is situated in a lonely place, two miles from any other, the next to it being Tim Murphy's farmhouse. The squire went to Chicago this morning, and won't return till next week, leaving nobody in the house save his wife and a man-servant. All we've got to do is to make an entrance through one of the back windows and get what money and valuables we can lay hold of; so come along, and let's be off, for we've lost time enough already."

Taking a carpet-bag, which contained their tools, the two men quitted the tree by the same way they had entered, and picked their way out of the woods.

Scarcely had they gone a dozen yards when a man crept from behind the hollow tree. It was the detective, who had been listening to their conversation.

"So you're going to try your hand at the squire's, eh? But you little think that I have heard all you've said, and you may depend I won't be a long way off, ha! ha!"

Let us leave the happy detective as he is making his way out of the woods, in an opposite direction to which the burglars had taken, while we return to the other two men, who have just emerged into the high road about a mile below the Carriman mansion.

After traversing this road for about half a mile, they turned off to the north, so that they would not come in front of the house.

Fifteen minutes' walk brought them in sight of the mansion of Squire Carriman, a wealthy stock raiser.

As before mentioned, the night was one of the darkest of this dark season of the year. Not a star was to be seen in the heavens; the sky was covered with dark clouds; in fact, it was just such a night the burglars desired for their dark deed.

The two men waited for the hour of midnight ere they commenced operations.

About half-past twelve they were seen stealing softly around the house.

Stopping before one of the kitchen windows, they noiselessly took out a pane of glass, leaving an aperture large enough to admit one of them at a time.

Making sure all was safe without, both men entered, and, lighting a dark lantern, they commenced their search for the squire's bedchamber, where they expected to find the safe.

After roaming about the various passages without encountering anybody or anything worthy of mention, they succeeded in finding the room.

Forcing back the lock with a skeleton key in the hand of Dick, they entered the room, which was empty.

But what is that causes their villainous faces to light up with joy? A large safe they see in one corner of the room, and, what is more, the key belonging to it placed, either by neglect or purpose, upon it.

It did not take them long to relieve the safe of its contents of gold, silver, and other articles of money value, amounting to about two thousand dollars, which they placed in the carpet-bag. This being done, they commenced their retreat, leaving the tools behind them.

All went well until they reached the kitchen. Here they were confronted by five men, who demanded them to halt. The men were Ben Harms and four of the detective force, the men Ben had called to follow him after leaving the wood; the sixth had been placed outside to guard the window.

Both thieves well knew that their little game was about "played out," but they were not the men to give up without a struggle.

Recovering from their surprise, they fought hard for their liberty, but, odds being against them, they were knocked down, made prisoners, and dispatched off to Columbus the next morning.

In court, later on, both men were sentenced to ten years in prison.

THE COUNTERFEITER'S STORY.

BY UNCLE TED.

I was off on my summer hunting and fishing-tour up in the Adirondacks, some years ago. Wishing to try the head of a stream which flows from a high mountain lake into the lower of the three Blue Mountain lakes, I took my rod and fly-hook, and with a good revolver in my belt for game, if I needed any, started through the heavy pine woods which border the lake.

It was a hard tramp, up hill, over rocky ledges, and a part of the way through a thick growth of ground hemlock, as hard to pass almost as a California chaparral.

But at last I reached the vicinity of the lake, as I could see by light through the trees ahead, and stood listening to the rush of water in the rapid outlet, when the scent of smoke reached my nostrils.

At this I wondered, for I believed this to be a region yet unexplored by fisherman or hunter, the repeated sign of moose having convinced me that the last had not been here to disturb them in their lofty haunts and feeding-grounds.

Going dead to windward to ascertain where the smoke came from, I approached the rapid and noisy stream that ran from the lake, and in about ten minutes came upon a fire just in front of a huge cleft in a precipice of rock, and a second later came upon a man, whose long, white hair and beard betokened advanced age, while his clothes showed extreme poverty, for they were literally all to pieces. And he, too, lying on an old tattered blanket, seemed to be in the last stage of dissolution—wan, hollow-eyed, almost a skeleton.

"In Heaven's name, old man, what are you doing here?" I cried.

"Dying, I reckon; but I'm glad somebody has come to see me off!" he said, in a low, gasping tone. "Promise to bury me so the wolves won't gnaw my bones, and I'll tell you something."

"I'll do better. I'll get you down to Eagle Lake, if you can last till I go for help, and you shall at least die with human comforts around you," I said.

"No, no; I shall never see another sunset. I know it. The chill of death is at my heart. I've hidden away from men a long time, and I don't want to see, or be seen, any more. You look as if you thought I was a murderer, but my hand is free from blood. But I was a counterfeiter—the head of a big gang. They got after us very hot. I was betrayed by one of the gang—sold for his own freedom; but I got away. I've kept away ever since, living—the Lord only knows how, but living—a hermit in these woods. It is thirty years I've been here, now. But I reckon I'm past arrest and trouble. Were you ever in Schoharie County near the springs where the Delaware River heads, above Lake Utsayanthe?"

"I was born in Delaware County," I said, "but I know little about the section you name."

"It was there we worked," gasped the old man. "There were only a few settlers near-by; and we had a cave in the woods, where we lived and melted our amalgam and coined our money into dollars, halves, and quarters.

"We pretended to be mining, to be looking for lead one of the Indians had found in the olden time. The people called the place where we worked Mine Hill. Maybe you've heard of it. We made a heap of hard money there, and our agents worked it off, and we got a great deal of good money together—enough to have left us all rich, if we had been satisfied and quit. But we wanted more, and so kept on till all at once we heard officers were on our track and were coming to grab us and our spoils.

"It was all hurry then. We divided up our good money—most of us buried it close by, marking the places so we would know where to look again, and then we scattered. They caught some; and I—well, I've been afraid to go back again, and now——"

A terrible fit of coughing came on, blood flowed freely from the poor old man's mouth, and I could see he was going.

Tenderly I raised his head, and he thanked me with a look from his dying eyes.

He tried hard amid the fits of coughing to say something more, but it was so disjointed I could make nothing of it:

"Rods east—spring—forked oak-tree—old maple—roots—money buried——" and then the blood rushed out so fast he could say no more.

I did all I could to help him, but I had no stimulant with me, and could find none in his little den back in the rocks. Water would not revive him, and he sank gradually away, dying just before sunset.

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